The Beach Boys on CD Volume 2

1970-1984

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For Holly

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Introduction

In this book and its two companion volumes, I am attempting to analyse, track by track, every available Beach Boys CD, including the solo albums, to try to provide a buyer's guide to the band's music.

This is an attempt to provide an analytical look at this music, but one that gives equal weight to all the band members, rather than just focusing on one or two. If Dennis Wilson's solo work is spoken of less harshly than Mike Love's, that's not because of a personal bias for Wilson or against Love, it's based purely on my assessment of them as artistic works.

But as anyone who read volume one is aware, this will be a very personal assessment. I make no claim as to objectivity here. While I have tried to note where I go against established consensus (for example in thinking little of Add Some Music, one of the most popular songs among the band's fans), this is a critical analysis from a single point of view.

Since Volume One of this series was published, there has been a huge amount of change in the Beach Boys world – the band have reunited, recorded a new album, toured and split up again – and as I write this a new box set, Made In California, has been announced. That will include some material from the 1970s, but will be dealt with in its proper place in volume three, which will contain information on the various rarities collections of the last few years.

But this has meant a change from the original plan for these three books. When Volume One was published, the Beach Boys were in the past tense, with a

definite end point on the band's career. That is no longer the case – even after the latest split, Brian Wilson, Alan Jardine and David Marks are recording new music together. My original plan was to have this volume cover the group's work up to 1996, and then to have volume three deal with their solo albums.

That plan no longer makes sense, as their 2012 CD That's Why God Made The Radio, and the subsequent live release, both have to be dealt with in the context of Brian Wilson's solo career. So I shall be dealing with the band members' solo recordings in chronological order, and this volume contains essays on the solo work of Carl Wilson, Bruce Johnston, Dennis Wilson and Mike Love. Volume Three will cover the solo work of Brian Wilson and Alan Jardine, as well as the Beach Boys' albums from 1985 through 2013.

This book attempts to trace the story of the band's music from 1970 through to 1983; a time of great change for the Beach Boys, when they went from creating some of their best music for a diminished, unenthusiastic audience, to artistic irrelevance while playing stadium gigs and being fêted by the President of the United States. While I attempt to deal mostly with the music, inevitably the band's personal lives affected this, and so the book deals with them to the minimum extent necessary.

But the only reason anyone cares about those lives is because of the music, and this book is a celebration of that music – a critical, sometimes even harsh, examination of it, but one that is a labour of love. The best of the music on Carl And The Passions (So Tough), The Beach Boys Love You or L.A. (Light Album) is as good as any music of the rock era, and deserves much more appreciation than it normally gets in books that focus on the band's work of the mid-60s and ignore the equally wonderful work they did later. This book is, in its flawed way, an attempt to redress that balance a little.

Sunflower

The band's first release for Warner Brothers, and of the 1970s, was the first - and in some ways the only - truly collaborative Beach Boys album. Originally put together as a contractual obligation album for Capitol under the working titles Reverberation and The Fading Rock Group Revival, before being submitted to Warners under the title Add Some Music, Sunflower as released features near-equal contributions from all six band members - the only time when one member wouldn't dominate either in number or quality of songs.

This was in fact something of a creative rebirth for the band, who recorded the best part of another album's worth of material during this time. Several different tracklistings were prepared – some rejected by Warner's, others scrapped by the band themselves – and much of the rejected was considered good enough for later release. But while the finished work is regarded as one of the band's best – Johnston among others saying that while Pet Sounds was Brian Wilson's masterpiece Sunflower was the Beach Boys' – to my mind there's something a little insubstantial about the finished product, and listening to the whole album is a little like trying to eat one's bodyweight in marshmallows. But for all that, it sounds like an album, rather than a disconnected set of semi-solo tracks like 20/20.

Partly this is because, unlike 20/20, this is more the work of a band. By this point the Beach Boys were augmenting themselves live with several extra musicians, including the Dragon brothers (Daryl (keyboards), Dennis (drums) and Doug (keyboards)) plus guitarist/bassist Ed Carter. These musicians played on much of what became Sunflower, and it gives the whole affair a more coherent feel.

It is far easier to discuss the Beach Boys' 60s work in terms of artistic progression, influences and so on than it is with their later work. Where the 60s work was the overall responsibility of one man, the 70s material is the work of up to eight different people, pulling in different directions. Sometimes it rises to a level of genius that is greater than the sum of its parts, but equally often it collapses into a lowest common denominator mush. But for the early part of the 70s, at least, this worked surprisingly well, with Dennis (as a songwriter) and Carl (as producer and increasingly lead vocalist) achieving occasional peaks as high as their brother's, while the rest of the band turned in competent work.

Before Sunflower, the Beach Boys had been reliant on a single creative voice, one who had captured the feeling of his times better than perhaps any other American songwriter save Bob Dylan, before losing touch with the surrounding culture. Sunflower marks the point where they started trying to get back in touch with the generation they had helped define.

From this point on, the Beach Boys start becoming relevant again.

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Bruce Johnston

Slip On Through

Songwriter: Dennis Wilson

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

A Dennis Wilson solo composition, this is the first real sign for several years that the Beach Boys were aware of the wider zeitgeist, and of the success of the harder-rocking San Francisco bands that had taken over in the imagination of the rock-buying public from the Southern California sound the Beach Boys had epitomised.

Rather than the nostalgia that is everywhere in 20/20, this sounds absolutely of its time. A funky rocker based around an incredibly simple set of chord changes, with just four chords in the whole thing, this has a huge drive and energy to it. Propelled by several layers of percussion (notably a bongo part low down in the mix) and Dennis' strongest ever vocal, one can hear the influence of Tim Hardin in this, as in many of Dennis' songs from this period, but there's a lusty swagger to this that is totally Dennis.

Without Dennis' vocal, this track would perhaps consist solely of signifiers of early-70s 'authenticity'. With it, it becomes an actually authentic emotional expression, rather than merely a pose. He means it, man.

This was released as a single but didn't chart.

This Whole World

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

At 1:58, the B-side to Slip On Through is one of the band's shorter songs, but this Brian Wilson solo composition has more harmonic dynamism packed into it than many bands manage to create, not over the course of roughly two minutes, but over careers lasting twenty years or more.

Starting in C, the first four bars are fairly straightforward changes, before we suddenly get a return of the old Pet Sounds staple: a key-change down a minor third. On the second line ("lots of different people everywhere") we get standard doo-wop I-vi-ii-V7 changes before a move to iii (C#m). This then changes to C# and suddenly we've changed key up a major third, ending up a semitone above where we've started.

We then get a scalar descending bassline (the first of several of these to appear on the album), while the chords move upwards in a I-IV-V movement in the new new key of C#, so the bass and chord changes meet on the V7. The rise continues in both the chord changes and the bass for a moment, taking us to vi, then the bass starts another descent and the two meet again on the V7 at the end of the verse. Note that all of this has happened in a single 32-second verse.

For the contrasting eight bar section, we have another Pet Sounds change down a minor third (for those who've lost track, this now puts us in B♭, a semitone down from where we started). These eight bars stay relatively harmonically stable, staying in the same key for a whole sixteen seconds before rising back into C and throwing us into the whirlwind that is the verse again. We get another verse, a wordless alternate section, and then fade on an a capella verse.

The remarkable thing about this is that every individual change makes sense on its own terms - the song goes through four different keys in half a minute, and

yet it doesn’t sound disorienting at all. In fact it sounds almost childishly simple, in part because of the lyrics, which rarely rise above the monosyllabic. Carl turns in one of his best performances, the rest of the band chant “oom-bop-didit” and the whole thing is a perfect pop record.

Certainly Brian appears to have been pleased with it, having returned to the song on a number of occasions - he produced a cover version by American Spring (his wife and sister-in-law) that included yet another section (a round based on the old “star light, star bright, first star I see tonight” rhyme) and recorded versions of the song on his solo albums I Just Wasn’t Made For These Times and Live At The Roxy.

Add Some Music To Your Day

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Mike Love and Joe Knott

Lead vocalists: Mike Love, Bruce Johnston, Al Jardine, Brian Wilson and Carl Wilson

This is one of several songs on this album where my opinion is in sharp contrast with that of the mainstream of Beach Boys fandom. Most people consider this a highlight of Sunflower, but I consider it an abject failure. Harmonically there’s nothing of interest here, there’s no air in the vocal arrangement, with everyone in more or less the same range (and too much thickening with multitracking), Carl sounds bored on his lines, and either Brian or Al is off-key at several points.

Lyrically, the song is not only banal in itself, it’s actually a celebration of the banal, praising music heard while ‘in a dentist’s chair’ or ‘faintly in the distance

when you’re on the phone’.

Add Some Muzak would be a better title. This was released as a single with Jardine’s marginally better Susie Cincinnati on the B-side, and reached number 64 in the US.

Got To Know The Woman

Songwriter: Dennis Wilson

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

This is a ridiculously over-the-top, idiotically simple groove-based rocker. The lyrics sound almost improvised, and the whole thing works only because of Dennis Wilson’s huge personal charm on the vocals (and Mike Love’s wonderfully ridiculous bass vocal part, very similar to the one we’ll later hear in Cool, Cool Water). However, while this aims low, it manages to comfortably hit its target. The one criticism I’d make of the track is that the overly-thickened layers of backing vocals buried in the mix (something that happens on almost every song on the album) really don’t suit it.

Deirdre

Songwriters: Bruce Johnston and Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Bruce Johnston

At best, this can be described as inoffensive. Johnston would later go on to write I Write The Songs, and while this is not as bad as that, it's definitely heading toward muzak territory, with its bland lyrics and fluttering flute part. In the context of Sunflower as a whole, it's not too dreadful, but there's no real reason for this to exist. The song bears a slight resemblance to the then-unreleased We're Together Again, but is smothered under layers of orchestration and backing vocals.

While Brian Wilson is credited as a co-writer of the track, this was apparently to give the impression that he made a greater contribution to the album than he had. According to Johnston, most of Wilson's input was to suggest lyrics like "my friend Bob/he had a job" which never made the finished song. [1]

It could have been much worse, though. See the entry for Going Public for how.

It's About Time

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson, Carl Wilson, Bob Buchman and Al Jardine

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

Now this is more like it!

There’s basically no song here - it’s just an excuse for a riff by Dennis Wilson, and the lyrics are the worst kind of hippy nonsense (“And now I’m just a child who art erect in humility/Serving out of love for everyone I meet in truth who are really me”).

But this is the funkiest the Beach Boys ever got, and easily the most exciting record they ever made. The percussion part by Earl Palmer and Dennis Dragon, in particular, is so outstandingly good that it’s been widely bootlegged on its own and makes a wonderful track even without the guitars, organ and vocals.

According to Bob Buchman, this started as a poem he wrote, to which Dennis Wilson wrote the earlier part of the music, before Carl Wilson and Jardine came up with the rest of the song, from the title onward. Buchman has claimed that these additions were to get Wilson and Jardine shares of the songwriting money, but in fact they’re essential to the whole thing – it’s precisely the change in dynamics that comes with the first drop down to Love singing “It’s about time, now, it’s about time”, and the slow build to the crescendo at “another world!” that makes the track as good as it is; the lyrics Buchman contributed are merely the grit around which the pearl grew.

This is an astonishingly exciting, enjoyable track, and clearly a highlight of the album. It was released as the B-side of Tears In The Morning, but didn’t chart.

Tears In The Morning

Songwriter: Bruce Johnston

Lead vocalist: Bruce Johnston

Side two begins with this horrible, horrible maudlin sappiness. Johnston does a great job on the vocal, but this pseudo-European waltz (with accordions and bad strings) is quite the most mawkish thing the band ever recorded, with lines like “Hope you love the baby I’m never gonna see”.

This belongs, of course, to the genre of divorce-rock that was so popular in the early 70s, but is a poor example even of that. Many of the lyrics are utterly meaningless, making neither literal nor metaphorical sense (“Well you know I lit a candle/It’s in my heart now where it glows/Day and night feel my light it’s gonna stand ’til/My heart believes in what you chose”) and there’s a surprising lack of craft for someone as practised as Johnston. The line “I won’t let nobody carry this load for me”, for example, requires Johnston to sing load as two syllables - “lo-oad”. Substituting in the word ‘burden’ would improve the scansion without affecting the meaning (it might even work slightly better given the generally overwrought nature of the lyrics). Meanwhile the music has no flow, instead lumbering and staggering along like a self-pitying drunk about to collapse.

Astonishingly, this was released as a single.

All I Wanna Do

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

This is a really strange, and quite innovative, track. Primarily written by Love, with its prominent bass and mechanical-sounding drums (as well as heavily-reverbed and delayed nasal vocals) it sounds like nothing so much as New Order, the 1980s post-punk/electropop band. The bridges, in particular, have a very New Order melodic shape, but everything about the melody, its conversational phrasing broken into very short phrases, sounds exactly like them.

That this is spookily premonitory of music more than a decade in the future, an ocean away and according to what should have been entirely different aesthetic criteria, perhaps shows that Mike Love's claims to commercial and artistic relevance are not wholly unfounded, and that even when the eyes of the world were off them the Beach Boys were still breaking new ground.

Not to be confused with All I Want To Do from 20/20.

Forever

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

A lovely, gentle, simple ballad, this is based on the same basic pattern as A Whiter Shade Of Pale, with which it shares its stately rhythm and vague Bach influence. In both cases the chord sequence of the main section of the song is one that can be found quite simply by anyone on a keyboard instrument.

Starting with a simple triad, (in D in this case), just play a descending scale with one finger in the bass while holding the main triad down, and you have the verse sequence for this (except that when the bass reaches G and E the chord switches to G and Em7 to avoid dischords). You get a sense of movement with the minimum of actual changes, and the cycle can repeat indefinitely, and that's what Wilson does for the most part here. The simplicity of the changes works perfectly with the heartfelt lyrics ("If every word I said could make you laugh, I'd talk forever").

Brian Wilson apparently loved the song, and contributed the gospel-tinged vocal arrangement (which includes possibly the last example of him singing in a strong falsetto - although he sounds thinner here than in earlier years, he hits higher notes than on any other recording).

The song remained a favourite of the band, being rerecorded by Brian Wilson for American Spring, and by the Beach Boys with John Stamos on their terrible 1990s album Summer In Paradise. Both Brian Wilson and the touring Beach Boys also included it in their live sets in the 2000s, as a tribute to Dennis.

Forever was released as a B-side to Cool, Cool Water.

Our Sweet Love

Songwriter: Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson and Al Jardine

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

This is another song where I am afraid I disagree with majority opinion. This is generally considered a highlight of Sunflower, and is often compared to God Only Knows, with which it does share a few features (the rhythm, the use of minor sixth chords, Carl Wilson's gorgeous vocals), but I have very little time for it.

The song is actually rather similar to Forever in the way it's constructed. This time the bass descends as a chromatic, rather than a major, scale in the verse (until getting to a fourth below the starting point, when it briefly becomes more mobile before the chorus) and in a diminished scale in the chorus. Again, the chords themselves change as little as possible while still accommodating these changes. Both Brian and Dennis were, for different reasons, fundamentally lazy songwriters at this point, and this kind of trick is a good way to get effective, interesting changes without even bothering to move your hands very much (John Lennon did the same kind of thing a lot).

But interesting as the chord sequence is, the lyrics, melody and arrangement are all more of the bland mush that dominates too much of this record.

At My Window

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Al Jardine

Lead vocalist: Bruce Johnston

A rather lovely little slice-of-life ballad, much in the manner of some of the material on Friends, this features Brian Wilson attempting to speak French, with possibly the worst accent ever heard. For those who are wondering, he's

attempting to say “le moineau se poser sur ma fenetre”, French for “the sparrow landed on my window”.

This was mostly by Jardine, and as with many of Jardine’s songs the melody is based on a folk song, in this case the Kingston Trio song Raspberries, Strawberries.

Cool Cool Water

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalists: Mike Love, Brian Wilson and Carl Wilson

The final track on Sunflower, and easily its highlight, is a bit of a Frankenstein creation. This song was originally recorded, without lead vocals, as I Love To Say DaDa during the Smile sessions. It was then rerecorded with the lyrics “add some cool cool water” chanted over and over, as a roughly two-minute track, during the Wild Honey sessions. This has led to suggestions that the track was originally intended as the ‘water’ part of The Elements (a section of Smile about which all we know for sure is that one track was “Fire”).

The Wild Honey-era track was then pulled out of the vaults during the Sunflower sessions, and crossfaded into the ‘water chant’ (an a capella chant consisting of the word ‘water’ repeated over and over, recorded during the Smile sessions) which then crossfaded into a new, Moog-driven, recording of the basic DaDa musical material, this time with new lyrics by Love, and lead vocals traded off between Brian Wilson in falsetto and Love in his bass range.

Surprisingly, the track works extremely well, and despite the simplicity of the song itself, with its almost mantra-like chanting, it closes the album quite beautifully. Released as a single, though, in an edit which started part-way through the water chant, it didn’t chart.

Overall, Sunflower is half a very good album, coupled with a lot of drivel. It’s nowhere near as good as its reputation suggests, but this mixed-bag, contractual-obligation, miraculously-coherent mess was a sign that the band were able to work together as a coherent unit, and a step in the right direction.

Surf’s Up

Shortly after the release of Sunflower, the Beach Boys hired former journalist and DJ Jack Rieley as their manager. Outside of the band members themselves, Rieley rapidly became the most important figure in the band’s story for the next few years.

Rieley was not just a manager in the traditional sense, he also advised them on how to relate to the counterculture that had been ignoring the band for the previous few years and collaborated with them in their songwriting. Rieley encouraged the band to focus on more political subjects, particularly the environment and the treatment of Native Americans, at the expense of the love songs that had dominated Sunflower. He also tried to recapture the mystique of the unreleased Smile, encouraging the band to finish Surf’s Up, the masterpiece that had been intended as the centre of that album, as well as writing his own lyrics in a style pastiching that of Van Dyke Parks (Rieley’s lyrics are far closer to the ‘acid alliteration’ tag Mike Love applies to Parks’ work than the Smile lyrics are).

Accordingly, under Rieley’s influence Surf’s Up presented an obvious break from the more “traditional” Beach Boys record fans had come to expect. The difference between this album and its precursor is apparent even from comparing their covers. While Sunflower’s cover features the Beach Boys and their children sat around near some blossoming trees, the cover of Surf’s Up is a murky painting, in dark blues, based on the sculpture End Of The Trail, showing a Native American, head bowed in defeat.

Rieley’s tactics were successful – within a short time the band would be hugely popular with college audiences and magazines like Rolling Stone, paving the

way for their commercial resurgence in the mid-70s – but they divided the band. Rieley claims that Love, Johnston and Jardine were more-or-less hostile to his aims for the band, while the Wilson brothers were more enthusiastic.

These inter-band disagreements made this album less than it could be – arguments about sequencing led to two tracks by Dennis Wilson being pulled, in favour of lesser works by Love and Jardine (Dennis Wilson also contributed little instrumentally, having injured his hand part-way through recording and being unable to play drums for a while). Nonetheless, this is still a significant artistic improvement over Sunflower, with the differences of opinion within the band leading to a real stylistic diversity, rather than the bland softness of much of the earlier record.

Unfortunately, it's difficult to listen to Surf's Up as it was intended to be heard at the time. Steve Desper, the band's principal engineer in the late 60s and early 70s, mixed the album in a stereo-compatible quadrophonic system, which allowed it to be played on a normal turntable but 'decoded' by a special piece of equipment called a Stereo-4 decoder, sort of the audio equivalent of wearing 3D glasses. These decoders are, of course, long-obsolete, and while apparently there are technological ways of extracting the extra pseudo-channels from the stereo sound, it is unlikely that these will be used by even one percent of those who listen to the record.

Even so, and even given its patchy nature, this is still in the very top tier of Beach Boys albums.

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Bruce Johnston

Don’t Go Near The Water

Songwriters: Mike Love and Al Jardine

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Al Jardine

The opening track is one of the most radical, brilliant things the Beach Boys ever did, production-wise.

No, seriously. I’m not joking.

This track is (rightly) regarded as a bit of a joke among Beach Boys fans, because the serious intent of the song – a plea to end pollution of the world’s water, a reasonable enough environmental message in itself – is completely undermined by the ludicrous nature of the lyrics, culminating in a strong contender for the most risible line in a released Beach Boys song. After Al Jardine sings “toothpaste and soap will make our oceans a bubble-bath/so let’s avoid an ecological aftermath”, any hope of taking the song seriously evaporates.

But under those lyrics, the arrangement is finally pulling together all the different pieces of ideas that the band had been using for some time, and making something totally different from anything anyone’s done before or since, but in a style which sets the dominant mode of the band’s studio output for the next few years.

This track has almost no electric guitars or drums on it. Instead, there are multiple layers of Moog sounds, but coupled with acoustic, folk instrumentation – acoustic guitars, banjo and harmonica. This seems to have been a sound arrived at by compromising different people's artistic visions – Brian and Carl Wilson, especially, seemed in love with the Moog for much of the 70s, while Jardine has always been a folkie at heart (and his 2010 solo album A Postcard From California sounds much like these early-70s albums would if you stripped the Moogs off). This combination of progression and futurism with tradition is in spirit (if not in execution – the song itself is still relatively poor) very much a return to the ideas the band had abandoned with Smile.

Long Promised Road

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

The first actual song Carl Wilson ever wrote (as opposed to contributing ideas to other people's songs, or 'writing' generic surf instrumentals), this is based around a simple but effective chord sequence, playing with the chords of Cmaj7 and F. The slow, meditative verses cycle through Cmaj7, Em (the same chord without the root note) and F (with a brief stop at Dm at one point, the relative minor of the F chord), while the choruses are a straight uptempo C - F rock chorus, ending with an ecstatic climbing bass scale which turns the penultimate F into a Dm. Meanwhile the Moog-dominated middle eight plays with inversions of these chords, adding in an Am7 (whose notes overlap those of F and C) and a Dm6.

This harmonic unity helps hold together a song whose different sections otherwise have very different moods. The verses are straightforward piano-based ballad sections, featuring just piano, bass and some light percussion, while the choruses feature a full drum kit, answering backing vocals, Moog, and horns, and the solo (over the chorus changes) also features rock guitar. All this instrumentation, other than the horns, is played by Carl Wilson on what is essentially a solo track.

It doesn't entirely work, partly because Rieley's lyrics are new age platitudes about fighting back against adversity, but couched in overly-complex words for such banal thoughts. But as a first effort at songwriting, this is superb.

Take A Load Off Your Feet

Songwriters: Al Jardine, Brian Wilson and Gary Winfrey

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson and Al Jardine

This, on the other hand, is practically the definition of filler. Written primarily by Jardine, the lyrics to this are a self-consciously 'quirky' guide to good foot hygiene. While this sort of thing has sometimes worked for the band, normally there has been something interesting in the arrangement or chord sequences to latch on to. But this song is, for the most part, just cycling between two common chords, and the arrangement seems perfunctory – like a sketchy half-improvisation rather than something more thought out. Various production tricks don't seem to hide the less-than-stellar nature of the composition.

Disney Girls (1957)

Songwriter: Bruce Johnston

Lead vocalist: Bruce Johnston

Johnston's sole songwriting contribution to Surf's Up, and his last until 1980, may well be his masterpiece.

One of the most complex compositions on the album, the verses to this song of wistful longing start out in G♭ before descending a tone into E, returning to the home key on the words "I'm coming back" at the end of each verse – a wonderful unity of lyric and music.

But lyrically, the song seems completely out of step with the concerns of the rest of the album. While the other band members are singing about the environment, civil unrest and political upheaval, Johnston is singing the praises of Patti Page, and saying of a girl "she's really swell, 'cos she likes church bingo chances and old-time dances".

This is, of course, the point – the song works precisely because it's a song of nostalgia in a time of unrest. Taken out of the context in which it appears here, it can sound slightly cloying, and even here it teeters precariously on the point of descent into Hallmark card territory (an area where Johnston would spend much of the rest of his songwriting career, in some cases very lucratively – he would go on to write I Write The Songs during his hiatus from the band).

But here, surrounded by songs about death, depression and environmental

destruction, one can more than sympathise with the desire to go back to what was (at least for a rich white man like Johnston) a happier, simpler time, even if it’s a desire most of us won’t share.

This song remains a staple of the Beach Boys’ live performances to this day, one of the only songs from this period that has remained regularly in their repertoire. Johnston’s songwriting contributions to the band were patchy, but when, as here, he hit on something good, he could deliver.

Student Demonstration Time

Songwriters: Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller (new lyrics Mike Love)

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

This, meanwhile, has no redeeming features whatsoever. Love’s attempt to be ‘relevant’ involves singing about student demonstrations to the tune of a 1950s hit, Riot In Cell Block Number Nine. This, however, has none of the earlier song’s subtlety or humour, and is not helped by the fact that Love, a right-winger, is trying desperately to sit on the fence here, attempting to appeal to the demonstrating students who made up the audience they were trying to court, but without ever actually saying anything to endorse their cause.

Musically, it’s an embarrassing attempt to ‘rock out’, featuring a clodhopping, lumbering drum beat, squealing distorted guitar, and a processed vocal from Love which is intended to sound like he’s singing through a bullhorn. The whole thing is a mess, best forgotten.

Feel Flows

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

Carl Wilson's second song for Surf's Up has, in recent years, become one of the most popular songs that the band has done without Brian Wilson, thanks largely to its inclusion in the soundtrack of the film Almost Famous.

In feel, this is very similar to the verses of Long Promised Road, and is based around a simple four-chord sequence (opened up a little by a descending scalar bassline on the alliterative words-starting-with-w sections), with a brief key change on the chorus lines.

The recording is in large part a solo performance by Carl Wilson, who played the piano (doubled but recorded slightly out of phase), organ (which was added to the track both clean and put through a Moog), bass, guitar and Moog, as well as adding some of the percussion. The only other instrumental contributions are by percussionist Woody Thews and flautist Charles Lloyd (a semi-regular collaborator with the band in the 70s, and a well-known jazz musician in his own right).

Some have claimed that Carl Wilson provided all the backing vocals as well, but while all the original Beach Boys could sound very like each other, Johnston's distinctive voice is in the mix, and I believe I can hear the other band members

(Johnston and Jardine are credited on the AFM papers for the session, but the logs for this period are unreliable). Much of the track (but most notably Wilson's lead vocal) is slathered in reversed echo.

Lyrically, this has variously been described as about either ejaculation or being on cocaine (the backing vocal line "white puff glistening shadowy flows"), but frankly the lyrics don't make any kind of sense on a literal level, and they're not meant to. They're pretty mouth-noises, and they do a good job of being that.

A much more successful song than Long Promised Road, and a declaration that now there was a third Wilson brother capable of producing great work.

Lookin' At Tomorrow (A Welfare Song)

Songwriters: Al Jardine and Gary Winfrey

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

Jardine's main solo song for Surf's Up was this acoustic folk song.
Accompanied by only multiple acoustic guitars and a cymbal (until the very last line, when a keyboard also enters), a heavily-processed Jardine sings about being unable to find a good job, but still having hope for the future.

Jardine has never been the most talented or original of songwriters, but this works very well, in part because Jardine takes inspiration from the folk tradition. The melody of this is largely taken from The Wanderer, a hit for the Kingston

Trio (a favourite band of Jardine's). That song, in turn, is based on the American folk song 900 Miles, which in turn is based on the bluegrass song Reuben's Train. Jardine makes up for his lack of songwriting inspiration by making himself a link in a longer chain, and the result is a nice, if slight, melody.

Lyrically, this is perhaps a little naive – it's the work of a man who had never himself been out of work, or had to hold down the kind of menial job he sings about here, and it shows – but it's well-intentioned enough. Unlike the cynicism of Student Demonstration Time, Lookin' At Tomorrow has its heart in the right place.

This song was briefly added to the band's live set around this time, where rather astonishingly it was rearranged to have an almost proto-trip-hop feel, quite unlike anything else the band ever did, and decades ahead of its time.

A Day In The Life Of A Tree

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Jack Rieley

The most controversial song of the band's career up to this point, to this day people still ask whether this was intended as a joke, or whether it's entirely serious. The answer, of course, is "yes".

Over a pump-organ backing, with a pedal note held throughout the verses, Jack

Rieley sings in a broken, off-key, quavering voice that sounds spookily like Brian Wilson's voice would a few years later, singing from the point of view of a tree that has been damaged by pollution and wants nothing more than to die.

While this sounds a ridiculous premise for a song, the actual sound of it is heartbreaking, if nothing else because the central idea of the tree, once tall, brought down into depression, is a pretty good metaphor for the state of Brian Wilson's own life at the time.

And then we get to the tag, where over cascading barbershop 'bom bom' vocals by the group, spread all over the stereo spectrum, Van Dyke Parks starts singing "trees like me weren't meant to live, if all this world can give is pollution" while Al Jardine responds "Oh Lord I lay me down, my branches to the ground, there's nothing left for me."

The whole thing is heartbreaking, if not exactly easy on the ears, and is an absolutely beautiful piece of work. Unfortunately, the effect is slightly undercut by the sequencing, which places all three Brian Wilson songs at the end of the record. All three songs have a similar tempo, and all end with vocal rounds, and the two songs that immediately follow this are two of the best songs ever written, so this one, which is merely very good, suffers in comparison. It's probably the worst piece of sequencing on any Beach Boys album.

'Til I Die

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson

And so, after eight songs which have rarely risen above the level of quite nice, we get to an absolute masterpiece, and what may be the finest song Brian Wilson has ever written on his own.

Wilson has said to Don Was that the original inspiration for this song came from sitting at the piano, playing a chord, then trying to make the most interesting-looking chords he could with his fingers, while keeping the top and bottom notes the same.

If this is the case, this didn't survive until the final version of the song, but the chord sequence here is cramped and obsessive, using the smallest possible finger movements to make the biggest possible changes.

These changes swell up and sink down like waves, but the movement is still inevitably down from a key of A♭ at the start of the verse to the key of G at the end. They are reinforced by the vibraphone arpeggios going up and down over the organ, bass, and mechanical drums, as the band sing the haiku-like lyrics in block harmony:

I'm a cork on the ocean

Floating over the raging sea

How deep is the ocean?

How deep is the ocean?

And then Brian takes a solo line, and your heart breaks:

I've lost my way, hey hey hey

It’s the “hey hey hey” that does it. The sense of almost cheerful resignation to fate. Brian is being buffeted by forces that he can’t understand, that he has no hope of controlling, and which will eventually destroy him. And he’s fully aware of that, but that’s just how things are. So it goes.

And then, if your heart hasn’t been shattered enough, he does it again at the end of the next verse – “It kills my soul, hey hey hey!”

There is no possible combination of words that can express the feelings that this evokes, and it’s when dealing with songs like this that one realises most the powerlessness of music criticism. How to describe the empathy that these words, sung like this, evoke? Words of the deepest despair, tossed off lightly, almost childishly, in the voice of an ancient child. See? It just turns one to pretension. There is no language that can cope with this.

If Brian Wilson had only ever written this song he would still be regarded as one of the great songwriters of all time. The Beach Boys’ reputation could rest on this track alone.

But they also recorded the next track...

Surf’s Up

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson, Brian Wilson and Al Jardine

Surf's Up was to have been the centrepiece of Smile [2] , and had become legendary among pop music fans after the 1967 TV broadcast Inside Pop: The Rock Revolution showed Brian Wilson playing a solo version of the song. However, when the Smile project was scrapped, the song had not yet been completely recorded.

During the recording of this album, Van Dyke Parks, the song's lyricist, who was at that point an executive for Warner Brothers (their record label), suggested they rerecord the song, as it was felt that they didn't have enough new strong material. Brian Wilson vehemently opposed this, as he had bad memories of the Smile period, and it has been argued by many that the disagreement over this song's inclusion was one of the principal reasons for Brian Wilson's decreased participation in the band over the next few years. Rieley, however, thought this was an excellent idea, as did the majority (though not all) of the band.

While the band attempted to record a totally new version of the song, they eventually ended up piecing together something that contained both 1967 and 1971 components. The backing track for the first half is the original Smile-era backing track, but all the vocals are new, including a new lead vocal by Carl Wilson, and there are a couple of overdubs. Then the second half (for which a backing track was never recorded in 1971) is a piano/vocal demo by Brian Wilson dating from 1966, with some subtle synthesiser overdubs, and the tag is the ending of Brian's demo, looped, with the band singing and some hand percussion added.

It shouldn't work. But in fact it's one of the most magnificent recordings of all time.

The song, of course, is the key thing. One of the first things written for Smile, it's as good – and ambitious – as any song of the 60s.

The verses are, musically, almost the opposite of those for Til I Die. They start very simply, alternating between Gm7/D and Dm7/G, before rising from the Gm starting key through the key of F to land in D, a major fifth above the original key, before the verse ends and it starts again.

This is then varied for the second, piano, section, and as it starts with Fm7/A♭ alternating with E♭/B♭, the opening chords to Caroline, No, we realise that the whole thing is an elaboration of, and expansion of, the musical ideas of that song.

But where Caroline, No was about the loss of a single woman's youth, Surf's Up is about the loss of far more – the loss of a civilisation. In Van Dyke Parks' elliptical, pun-filled lyrics, we see a concertgoer falling asleep to the sound of the rattling jewellery of the rich people in the other seats and the classical music being played, and dreaming of the collapse of an entire civilisation – "columnated ruins domino", buildings and structures falling down, climaxing with the piano going silent as Brian sings "a broken man too tough to cry".

But then there is the realisation – "Surf's up aboard a tidal wave". The wave that destroys is also a renewer, and for new things to be built, old ones must be swept away. "I heard the word, wonderful thing, a children's song". And over the chorus of "Child is father of the man" the song fades as Al Jardine sings "A children's song, have you listened as they played?/Their song is love, and the children know the way".

In the context of Smile there's much, much more to say about this, how it ties together the musical and lyrical themes of that album, but I shall leave that for

volume three. For now I’ll just say that this track is the crowning moment of the Beach Boys’ artistic career. It’s all downhill from here, though to start with the slope is pretty gentle.

Carl & The Passions (So Tough)

Carl & The Passions feels very much like the work of a totally different band from the one that recorded Surf's Up, and that's because to a great extent it is.

After Dennis Wilson damaged his hand and could no longer play drums, he moved to the front of the stage and became a co-frontman with Mike Love. This left an opening on the drum stool, and Carl Wilson suggested that two members of The Flame, a South African band who he had been producing for Brother Records, should join the touring band.

The addition of Blondie Chaplin (on guitar and bass) and Ricky Fataar (on drums) changed the sound of the band immensely, as one would expect from adding two black South African musicians to a band that was the quintessential whitebread American band. The band then changed even more with the departure of Bruce Johnston, part-way through recording this album. The circumstances around Johnston's departure remain unclear, although it seems to have been due to a clash between Johnston and Jack Rieley. Rieley saw the band as two factions – the Wilson brothers, who were interested in making interesting, creative music, and Love, Johnston and Jardine, who weren't.

Whether this was true or not, the addition of two proteges of Carl Wilson, and the departure of Johnston, definitely brought the band more in line with Rieley's vision. The resulting album is much more R&B flavoured than anything the band had done since Wild Honey, but shows little group unity (the fact that the back cover photo has Brian Wilson crudely pasted into a shot of the rest of the group says much about the state of internal relations in the band at the time). Essentially, this is a collection of four singles – two rockers by Brian, two Love/Jardine songs about meditation, two Flame tracks, and two Dennis Wilson

ballads – that could be the work of four different bands. Carl Wilson is, largely, the common denominator, working with everyone to get their tracks into shape, and it's because of his role as de facto leader at this point that the record is named Carl & The Passions, after a name under which an early high-school version of the band had performed.

Carl Wilson is, in fact, the only Beach Boy to appear on every track here, but to a large extent there's a coherent band playing the backing tracks, with a core of Carl Wilson, Chaplin, Fataar and Billy Hinsche (Carl Wilson's brother-in-law, and keyboard and guitar player in the touring band). The production credit reads "produced by the Beach Boys (especially Carl Wilson)", although the two Dennis Wilson tracks were actually produced by Dennis Wilson and Daryl Dragon, for an earlier, abandoned project.

While the album never hits the heights of Surf's Up or Til I Die, it's actually the band's most consistently good LP since Friends, which makes it all the more annoying that it was hamstrung by a bizarre marketing decision.

Part of the band's contract with Warners had specified that they would complete Smile and release it, and it was originally intended that it be as a double-album set with this album. However, without Brian Wilson's collaboration, Carl Wilson was unable to get the Smile tapes into a releasable state. Instead, it was decided to release Carl & The Passions as a two-disc set along with a reissued Pet Sounds, the rights to which had reverted to the band.

This meant that the music here had to stand direct comparison with what was generally regarded as their best ever work, as well as annoying long-time fans who had to buy a second copy of an album they already owned and putting off new listeners who didn't want to listen to six-year-old music. The end result was that Carl & The Passions became the least critically successful work of their post-1967 career to date, despite its generally strong quality.

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Blondie Chaplin, Ricky Fataar, Bruce Johnston (uncredited)

You Need A Mess Of Help To Stand Alone

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

A rewrite by Rieley of an unreleased Brian Wilson song called Beatrice From Baltimore, this isn't much of a song in itself, consisting mostly of just I, IV and V chords, with a brief F-G7-A7 rise on the chorus line being the only break from the home key of G. The melody is trite, and the lyrics don't say very much.

The performance and arrangement are another matter, though. Carl Wilson's lead vocal here is just extraordinary, consisting of a near-perfect double-tracked 'clean' lead (one track in the centre channel and one panned slightly to the right), along with, in the left channel (and sometimes itself doubled), an incredibly gruff, barked version of the same part that must have been hell for his vocal cords, and which manages to keep the same exact pitch and phrasing throughout while singing in a completely different voice. (There is also, sometimes, right on the edge of hearing, another 'gruff' voice, which might be bleed-through from an early take or dummy vocal, and which I couldn't swear isn't Brian Wilson singing). He then uses yet another, sweeter, voice for the "she don't know"

sections of the song. It's an astonishing, virtuosic, vocal performance, and one that is utterly unlike anything he'd ever done before. The Beach Boys have here turned from a pop band into a rock band, and amazingly they do it rather well.

The instrumental arrangement benefits enormously from the musical abilities of Chaplin and Fataar. The Flame had been a band whose music was halfway between soul (they started as a soul covers band) and Beatles pastiche (it's no coincidence that Fataar was later chosen by Neil Innes as the guitarist for his Beatles parody group The Rutles), and here we have the band playing with a groove they've never really played with before – the difference between this and the lumbering attempt at rock that is Student Demonstration Time is revelatory – while there is some gorgeous George Harrison-style slide guitar added on top of the more normal rock guitar.

Then on top of this we have some lightning-fast double-time picked banjo, played by legendary bluegrass musician Doug Dillard, in another example of how the band were starting to integrate folk and country instruments into their musical blend.

The whole thing works entirely because of the level of attention paid to details of arrangement and performance, for what is at root a rather lacklustre song. On the other hand, as a statement of intent, this works – it sounds absolutely nothing like "the Beach Boys" as they were in the mind of the public, and so it was chosen as the lead-off single for the album, though unsurprisingly it flopped.

Here She Comes

Songwriters: Blondie Chaplin and Ricky Fataar

Lead vocalist: Ricky Fataar and Blondie Chaplin

Unsurprisingly, the first Chaplin/Fataar song on a Beach Boys record sounds utterly unlike the Beach Boys, and rather a lot like The Flame. A simple, rather plodding country-rock track heavily influenced by The Band and George Harrison (it sounds like Old Brown Shoe was a distant influence), this is the kind of thing a thousand bands were doing at the time, with lyrics like “crazy woman can you see/that I’m giving to you can you dig me?”

That’s not to say it’s unpleasant, however – it’s a competent example of its genre, and very enjoyable to listen to. It’s just unoriginal.

The most noticeable thing about this song is how well Chaplin and Fataar fit with the Beach Boys vocally. While Johnston’s voice never fit the band’s family blend, Chaplin especially has a voice that sounds spookily like Carl Wilson at times, and sometimes also has something of Jardine’s resonance. His singing style is more soul-influenced than theirs is, but he (and to a lesser extent Fataar), sounds like a Beach Boy, in a way that neither Johnston or David Marks ever really did.

He Come Down

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Al Jardine and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love, Blondie Chaplin, Al Jardine and Carl Wilson

Another piano-based song based on I-IV and I-V changes, this is very much a musical cousin of You Need A Mess Of Help, but here the music is in a gospel style – a style which the band had never really explored before, but which they suit perfectly. Over a backing track of just piano, organ and handclaps, the band are allowed to shine with what is easily the most impressive vocal performance of the album, with each vocalist allowed to sing freewheeling gospel vocal lines over a unison chant of “dit dit, you know I believe it”, with a break for a mass choral “yes I believe it” which is just spellbinding.

The only flaw with the track is the lyrics, which seem to be trying to teach a syncretic Christian Hinduism, in which both Jesus and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi are avatars of Krishna, or something. However, perhaps the lesson here is simply that one doesn’t turn to the Beach Boys for theology lessons; musically, this is spectacular.

Marcella

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Jack Rieley and Tandyn Almer

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

And side one finishes with the third and final Brian Wilson contribution to the album (as well as the only song on which Johnston appears). Another simple, riffy, R&B-flavoured rock song, this one had a history going back almost nine years at the time it was recorded, having started life in the early 60s as All Dressed Up For School (a track that remained unreleased until 1990) before then becoming the Sunflower-era outtake I Just Got My Pay. This final version had lyrics about a favourite hem-hem masseuse of Brian’s acquaintance, before Rieley and Tandyn Almer (the writer of, among other songs, Along Comes Mary for The Association) got hold of it and added some vaguely hippyish lyrics to it.

This side of the album has proved, if nothing else, that the Beach Boys really could work as a rock band in the early-70s mode. While this song doesn't admit of much analysis, it's a wonderful record, and the song stayed in the band's setlist for several years. It's also a mainstay of Brian Wilson's solo shows, and was played regularly during the band's fiftieth anniversary reunion tour in 2012.

Hold On Dear Brother

Songwriters: Blondie Chaplin and Ricky Fataar

Lead vocalist: Blondie Chaplin

The second song by the Flame members is cut from the same cloth as the first; indeed if anything it is even more obviously influenced by The Band – it's hard not to imagine Levon Helm singing lead on this even while it's playing.

Harmonically, this is extremely simple, being almost entirely based around a doo-wopish vi-IV-I-V progression, with the only real musical spot of interest being in the chorus, where the song changes from its slow waltz time into alternating bars of fives and sixes.

This is certainly not a bad track in any way, although it does rather outstay its welcome at nearly five minutes, but it has little to do with the Beach Boys other than Carl Wilson's backing vocal part, and it could have been made by any of a thousand bands at the time. Pleasant enough, but inessential and inconsequential. Some nice slide guitar by Red Rhodes isn't enough to let the track stand up to

repeated listens.

Make It Good

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Daryl Dragon

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

This, on the other hand, is half the length of the previous song but an absolute revelation. For some time, Dennis Wilson had been working with Daryl Dragon, the band's touring keyboardist (who would later find fame as The Captain in The Captain And Tennille), but other than one Tim Hardin-influenced single (released under the name Dennis Wilson And Rumbo) nothing from their collaborations had been released. This track and Cuddle Up were both originally intended for a Dennis Wilson solo album, but later completed for this project.

Here, for the first time, Dennis Wilson has found his own voice. His previous work, while often approaching greatness, had always been in his brother's style – Forever, for example, could as easily have been Brian's work as Dennis'.

This, on the other hand, sounds like nothing the band had ever done before. Dennis' song (and it is mostly Dennis' song, with Dragon assisting with the arrangement and helping him realise his ideas) owes as much to Wagner as to Brian Wilson, and has simple, impressionistic lyrics, with only a few words per line, over a huge, sweeping, string arrangement, with the vocals croaked out in a broken voice that would be Dennis' trademark from here on in.

It should, frankly, be awful – on paper it sounds like the worst kind of overblown 70s pretentious nonsense. But it works, and it works absolutely. This is Dennis Wilson finally showing the same kind of musical honesty as his brother, and just like Brian Wilson he manages to convince absolutely. The difference in styles is the difference in the two men's personalities – while Brian's music, like the man himself, is quiet, diffident, and slightly off-kilter, Dennis' music has his own characteristics – extreme, passionate, completely over-the-top. By all accounts Dennis Wilson was a man with little control of his emotions, who had higher highs and lower lows than any of his bandmates, and those large emotions need a large musical canvas to paint on.

Simply gorgeous.

All This Is That

Songwriters: Mike Love, Al Jardine and Carl Wilson

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson, Al Jardine and Mike Love

This, meanwhile, is a rare attempt at genuine artistic growth from Love and Jardine (Carl Wilson apparently came up with the vocal arrangement, for which he got his portion of the songwriting credit – he also produced the backing track, which features only him, Chaplin and Fataar).

Harmonically extremely simple (a chorus based on Imaj7-IVmaj7, with a verse going Imaj7-ii7-V7, about as simple as it can get), the beauty of this song is entirely in the sound and feel of the track, with some of the best vocals the band have ever done.

The song was originally written by Jardine, based on Robert Frost's poem The Road Not Taken , but Love and Jardine later combined this influence (in the chorus line "two ways have I/both travelled by/and that makes all the difference to me") with inspiration from the Upanishads (the core religious texts of Hinduism) as interpreted by the Maharishi.

Love, in particular, clearly thought this was an important message for the band to convey, and turns in possibly the best vocal performance of his life on the verses (subtly shadowed by Jardine on the first verse), but the real highlight of the track, and of the album, comes with the tag, as Carl Wilson goes higher into his falsetto than he ever did before or since (it may be the only time he actually goes into true falsetto on a studio recording) singing "Jai guru dev [3] ", while Mike sings it in the bass register like a mantra. It may be the single finest vocal moment on any Beach Boys record.

This song clearly means a lot to Love, who regularly includes it in sets by his touring version of the Beach Boys, and it was also a highlight of the 2012 reunion tour.

Cuddle Up

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Daryl Dragon

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

And the final song is another one that was originally intended for Dennis' solo

album (where it was apparently originally going to be titled Old Movie, although this title has also been applied to Fourth Of July), and one of the best things he ever wrote. Based roughly around a melodic idea from Brahms' Lullaby, this has some harmonic resemblance to Forever – both start their verses with the simple pastiche-baroque idea of having a descending scalar bassline, while keeping as many notes in the rest of the chord as possible the same – but unlike Forever this then goes into a B section ("Your love, your love...") which reverses this pattern. A pedal note of C is kept while a triad progresses upwards through a scale (C-Dm7/C-Cmaj7-F) but then the inevitable progression upwards takes us up and out of the home key altogether, as we keep progressing up by tones to the climax ("honey...I'm in love"), which drops us briefly back to the C chord for a second but which ends up with us in the new key of B♭, a full tone down from where we started.

It's a progression which is completely counterintuitive but absolutely works, and makes sense, causing the song to build to an almost orgasmic peak before collapsing down into a post-coital doze.

While it has more Beach Boys involvement than the previous Dennis track (both Carl and Blondie can be heard with very prominent backing vocal lines), this is still a Dennis Wilson solo track in all but name, and points the way forward to the style he would use for his solo work in the latter part of the decade. While the Wagnerian pomp of Dragon's string arrangements is less appropriate here than on Make It Good, it still works, and this track manages to be the perfect close to an album which, despite all its inconsistencies, is one of the best the band ever produced.

Holland

Holland is, in many ways, the last gasp for the Beach Boys as an artistic group. They would produce good work again, both as a band and as individuals, but in future their work would be driven by one or two members of the band at a time rather than being a true group effort.

For the recording of the bulk of the album, the band decamped to Baambrugge in the Netherlands, and had their recording studio shipped over as well (which caused a huge amount of delay). This was at the instigation of Jack Rieley, and many reasons have been given over the years for the move, including tax issues, the idea that a change of scenery would inspire Brian Wilson, and even the laughable claim that it would be harder for those band members with drug problems (especially Brian Wilson) to obtain drugs in Holland than the USA. The fact that Rieley opted to remain in the Netherlands (and, for a while, attempted to continue managing the band's career from a distance) may say more about the reasons than anything else.

The trip abroad did inspire Brian Wilson, but not in the way that the band had hoped or expected. Instead of coming up with any new conventional songs, his main piece of work during the trip to the Netherlands was a short story with musical accompaniment, Mount Vernon And Fairway (A Fairy Tale), that was initially included as a bonus 45 and is now included at the end of the CD release.

The record that the band submitted was considered too weak to release by Warner/Reprise, until Van Dyke Parks suggested that the song Sail On Sailor, initially not part of the album's line-up, would make a good single. This replaced the Chaplin/Fataar/Love track We Got Love (which was accidentally included on some early German pressings) and the resulting album got some of the best

reviews of the band's career, though it was less commercially successful, scraping into the top forty in the US, but doing slightly better in the UK where it made the top twenty.

Holland is actually one of the most cohesive albums the band ever did, with an ongoing theme of travel, especially by sea, and of a homesick longing for America. It's also, thanks to the many different combinations of band members writing together in ways they otherwise never did, the most collaborative of the Beach Boys' albums.

This cohesion helps overcome what is actually a fairly weak set of material – there's nothing here on the level of an All This Is That or Make It Good, let alone Til I Die or Surf's Up, but Holland is nonetheless one of the more worthwhile listening experiences of the band's later years [4] .

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Blondie Chaplin, Ricky Fataar

Sail On Sailor

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Van Dyke Parks, Ray Kennedy, Tandyn Almer and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Blondie Chaplin

The opening song has a history which has been the subject of much recent debate. The generally-accepted story until recently went as follows: the Beach Boys turned in Holland but it had no obvious single on it. At this point Van Dyke Parks remembered a cassette he had in his possession of a song being written by himself and Brian Wilson, which had single potential. Various hands brushed up the song, at which point Carl Wilson took various backing band members into the studio and cut an instrumental track, with Brian supervising over the telephone. Dennis Wilson attempted a lead vocal, but gave up after a couple of takes, and Blondie Chaplin took over.

However, Steve Desper, who had been the band's engineer for much of the late 60s and early 70s, but had stopped working for the band just before the trip to Holland, claims that the backing track dates back much earlier, and is a track that Brian Wilson had been working on for a long time. He also claims that the song originally had Carl Wilson on lead vocals, and that Chaplin is imitating Wilson's phrasing exactly (a reasonable claim – Chaplin sounds spookily like Wilson here).

Whatever the truth of this (and I am inclined to believe Desper here), there is also the question of who exactly wrote what. A press release at the time claimed it was "a Brian Wilson-Jack Rieley song with writer credits suggesting informal assistance from a wide range of characters, among them Van Dyke Parks". Steve Desper, on the other hand, has claimed that the lyrics are entirely Parks' work, and Parks has claimed in the past that not only did he write all the lyrics but also the chord changes in the chorus and the start of the middle section. If this is the case, then Brian Wilson's contribution to the song is reduced to coming up with the verse riff (a (12)/(8)shuffle between I and IV, actually quite similar to a gospel take on Imagine) and possibly the melody.

One might possibly get an idea of what actually happened by listening to a version of the song recorded by KGB, a band featuring Ray Kennedy. This version is credited only to Wilson/Kennedy, and has fairly incoherent lyrics

about cocaine and trying to get out of the ghetto. One suspects that Wilson brought his initial idea to several different collaborators, at different times, without necessarily thinking to mention to them that he was working with other people. My own guess (given the reliability of the various parties involved) is that Parks' account is largely correct – not only is Parks the most scrupulously honest person involved, with an excellent memory, but the song just sounds like a Van Dyke Parks song rather than a Brian Wilson song.

Whatever the process involved though, the end result is the most convincing attempt at R&B that the Beach Boys ever did, with a strong lead vocal from Chaplin, excellent group backing vocals (apparently only featuring Carl Wilson, Chaplin and Fataar from the Beach Boys, along with backing band member Billy Hinsche, session steel guitar player Tony Martin, and Gerry Beckley from the band America, though some have claimed that the other Beach Boys later overdubbed additional vocals), and in its VI♭-VII♭-I chorus changes a hook so powerful that the band reused it (a tone up and in (4)/(4)time) for their 1985 hit Getcha Back.

The song was released twice as a single, hitting number 79 on the charts in 1973, and number 49 in 1975. Despite this relative lack of chart success, it was popular on the radio at the time and has remained a fixture in the setlists of the Beach Boys and their various solo shows.

Steamboat

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

The second track continues the sailing theme, here with a typically-inscrutable Rieley lyric about steamboat travel. The lyrics are pretty and evocative, but make very little sense on any kind of literal level – lines like “The stream is a timepiece of children bridged with crystal haze” defy any normal interpretation. [5]

Musically, the song is built around simple I-V7 changes for the most part (with a V7-VI7-II7 change at the end of the verse which is actually similar in its effect to the more outrageous chorus progression in Sail On Sailor), until the tag when the V7 changes into a VI♭7, with mechanical-sounding drums perfectly evoking the feel of a paddle-wheel turning in the water and the hiss of steam.

The effect is possibly a little too dragged out – the combination of Carl Wilson’s lazy-sounding vocals, however lovely, and the slow, mechanical pace of the song, tends to drag long before the four minutes and thirty-six seconds of the song is up – but it’s a worthwhile track, and a sign of the stylistic evolution that was bringing Dennis Wilson to the more confident style of his later work on Pacific Ocean Blue.

California Saga: Big Sur

Songwriter: Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

The centrepiece of Holland, covering the bulk of side one, was a thematically-linked suite of songs by Love and Jardine called California Saga. Possibly the most artistically-ambitious thing either man ever did, this was in part inspired by

their homesickness for California while living in Holland, but also tied into the themes of the environment and of travel that suffuse the band's music at this point.

California Saga is unusual in the Beach Boys' work in that rather than celebrating Southern California, and in particular Los Angeles, as most of their California-centred work did, it instead focusses on Central and Northern California, especially the less-populated areas.

The first of the three songs is this, the first release by the band to have Love as the sole credited writer, and a surprisingly pleasant track. Starting with the ascending/descending Cm arpeggios that make up the bulk of the next song, we then go into a pleasant country-folk waltz, mostly based on a single C major chord with a scalar bassline that goes up and down much as the arpeggios at the beginning.

The song only really contains four chords, and is the kind of thing that could be written by someone with rudimentary or non-existent instrumental skills, but it has a catchy enough melody, and shows that Love was a competent songwriter in his own right. The instrumentation is equally primitive, mostly acoustic guitar and harmonica, evoking a campfire singalong, along with piano, drums and steel guitar.

The whole track is surprisingly pleasant, for a first solo songwriting attempt, but it could have been better – the song was first recorded three years earlier, and that version (unreleased but widely bootlegged) is in (4)/(4) rather than waltz time. Once one has heard this earlier version, the version on Holland sounds slightly ungainly in comparison, with the stresses falling less gracefully than on the original.

California Saga: The Beaks Of Eagles

Songwriters: Al Jardine, Lynda Jardine and Robinson Jeffers

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine and Mike Love

The second part of the California Saga is unique in the Beach Boys' catalogue, though it points the way stylistically towards some of Jardine's later work.

It's almost two separate songs in itself, in fact. In what, for want of a better term, we can call the verses, we have the ascending/descending C-minor piano arpeggios (with a descending bass) that started Big Sur, along with some Morricone-esque flute from Charles Lloyd. Over this, Love recites, in three sections, The Beaks Of Eagles, a poem by far-right-wing environmentalist poet Robinson Jeffers, about how in the lifetime of one eagle human civilisation could change utterly, and how yet ultimately humans are constrained by their natures just as much as the eagles are.

The choruses, meanwhile, are in C major, built around yet another ascending/descending bassline, and feature Jardine, singing new lyrics to a conventional melody, over a backing of guitar, bass, drums, piano and flute.

The thing that most people listening to this will notice now is that it is the first time Jardine uses a style which he returns to repeatedly in his later songs, of having someone speak or recite poetry over part or all of a song (see especially the Tidepool Interlude on his solo album A Postcard From California , but also California Energy Blues and Santa Ana Winds), and it's easy to see this as a step towards Jardine's later work, probably inspired by the artistic success he'd had

using The Road Not Taken for All This Is That (Robert Frost, the author of The Road Not Taken, was a contemporary of Jeffers and wrote on similar themes).

But what's more interesting is to compare the poem that inspired this piece, and which Love recites verbatim, with the interpolated material by the Jardines. Jeffers referred to himself as an 'inhumanist', and claimed that humanity was fundamentally unimportant to him, that he preferred nature to humanity. His poem, therefore, like much of his work, is an attempt to see things on an inhuman scale, to apply a perspective that one might call either realistic or misanthropic depending on one's own sympathies.

The chorus material, though, is all on the human scale – about death, and rebirth coming from it. The lyricist here (either Al or Lynda Jardine) is also writing about natural cycles, as Jeffers is, but on a human scale, and based in human needs and concerns. And despite the rather hippyish conclusion, there's a real sense here of how the need to acquire mineral wealth can destroy people's lives (the image of the dead mariners, shipwrecked while transporting limestone ore, ties in nicely both with the first two songs, but also with The Trader).

Fundamentally, while Jardine may have been inspired by Jeffers' poetry, their worldviews are incompatible. The writer of those chorus sections cares about human beings in a way that Jeffers doesn't, and while one may argue that in the grand scheme of things Jeffers' worldview is more correct, the worldview of the choruses is much more caring and decent. Jeffers may have been the better artist, but Jardine comes across as much the better man.

California Saga: California

Songwriter: Al Jardine

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson, Mike Love and Al Jardine

The second single off Holland was this song, the last part of California Saga, and with good reason. Easily the most commercial thing Jardine has ever written on his own, this is an updating of California Girls (with a hint of Help Me Rhonda in the rhythm) for the 1970s country-rock era, keeping Love's nasal voice and the Tumbling Tumbleweeds bass-line (here played on Moog), but using acoustic guitar, harmonica (apparently played by Brian Wilson) and banjo rather than a Wall Of Sound orchestra.

Musically, it's a simple song, just using the chords C, F and G, but it communicates a feeling of relaxed joy in nature that really does seem like a more mature version of the youthful ecstasy of California Girls. Out of the larger context of the California Saga, this is an unpretentious and unambitious song, but all the better for it, while within that context it's the joyous release we've been waiting for since the suite's start.

Despite its relative lack of commercial success (barely scraping the top 100 in the US, though reaching the lower reaches of the top forty in the UK), this has remained a fan favourite, and was the only solo Jardine composition (and, other than All This Is That, the only one for which he was primary songwriter) to appear on the career-spanning Good Vibrations: Thirty Years Of The Beach Boys box set. Jardine returned to the song on his 2010 solo album A Postcard From California, remaking it with David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Neil Young providing harmony vocals, and the song also became a regular in the setlists of the Beach Boys' 2012 reunion tour.

The Trader

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson (with Justyn Wilson saying “Hi”)

The Trader is Carl Wilson’s primary songwriting contribution to Holland, and the last new song he would bring to the band until L.A. (Light Album) in 1979, so it’s a good job that it’s a good one.

The song breaks into two halves, with little connection between them, either musically or lyrically. The first half is possibly the most overtly political thing the Beach Boys ever recorded (albeit it is a condemnation of acts carried out by people who were long-dead). Over a piano-led rock background, Wilson sings about the colonisation of the Americas, the genocide of their native population, and the way the land had been ‘civilised’. It’s Rieley’s most straightforward lyric, and also his best. It also manages to tie in with the themes of sea travel, America, and nature in opposition to industrial civilisation that permeate the whole of the album.

But then, almost exactly half-way through the song, the key changes from G to C, the prominent piano drops out to be replaced by sighing backing vocals and tinkling Moog, and the lyric goes from concrete to utterly abstract, as the song turns into something closer to Carl Wilson’s songs from Surf’s Up. Instead of “Trader found the jewelled land was occupied before he came/By humans of a second look who couldn’t even write their names”, the lyrics suddenly become “Embracing together, like the merging streams, crying dreams”.

Frankly, it shouldn’t work – this song sounds exactly like something that’s been bolted together from two different ideas, with no real thought as to how the two sections actually interact. Yet it does work, mostly through sheer chutzpah, but also through an absolutely remarkable vocal performance from Carl Wilson, who

goes from a strained, pained vocal near the top of his range in the rock section to a softer, gentler, reassuring vocal for the second, mellow section. Somehow, the result is actually better than the sum of the parts, though there's no earthly reason why it should be. It works because Wilson and Rieley say it works, and because they both had enough talent at this point to do something as ambitious as this.

The song became a regular in the band's setlist for much of the rest of the 1970s, even as the rest of the set became increasingly dominated by hits, and was a favourite with crowds, again thanks largely to Carl Wilson's vocal performance.

Leaving This Town

Songwriters: Carl Wilson, Blondie Chaplin, Ricky Fataar and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Blondie Chaplin

A tedious song that unfortunately merges the worst aspects of both Carl Wilson's and the Flame team's writing, this plods along based on slow, steady piano chords in much the same style as Feel Flows, and has a simple chord sequence (alternating between I, V, i and v in two keys a tone apart) with little of interest about it. The melody over the top stays, like all the Chaplin/Fataar material, in a narrow range, and consists mostly of long, held notes.

Once the song gets to the two minute long Moog solo, it takes a great deal of effort for the listener to keep awake, and the lyrics are enough of a formless mess (a case of too many cooks, one suspects) that there is no emotional hook to encourage one to listen for much longer. Easily the least interesting thing that

Chaplin and Fataar had a hand in during their time with the Beach Boys, and the most pointless thing on the album (Beaks Of Eagles is worse, but it's an ambitious failure, while this seems to have been made with no greater ambition in mind than filling six minutes of vinyl).

Only With You

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

In an unfortunate piece of sequencing, Leaving This Town is followed by another sedate, mellow song at a near-identical tempo, and the momentum is killed stone dead. It's a shame because, unlike the previous song, this one really is worthwhile.

While Love and Dennis Wilson had a legendarily fractious relationship, their few songwriting collaborations (of which this is the only one to end up on a Beach Boys album rather than a solo release) show a deeper mutual sympathy, and Love's lyrics and Wilson's music here complement each other perfectly.

Musically, this is one of the simplest things Dennis Wilson had composed to this point, possibly because it wasn't written in collaboration with the more musically-sophisticated Daryl Dragon, and the only really interesting change is the one from Em/G to E7/G# (in a section that feels like it's in G, but which is in fact in the same key of D as the rest of the song) under the phrase "love had always had its ups and downs". However, the song's simplicity is its key – a direct lyric combined with simple changes gives this song a formal grace that is

very different from the primal howl of many of Dennis' songs.

While Carl Wilson's vocal on this track has been almost universally praised, it doesn't quite work as well for me as for many others – while his vocal on the quieter verses is exemplary, he is a little mannered on the middle eight and tag (something that would become increasingly true of his vocals over later years). It's a very good performance, yes, but one is left wishing that Dennis had sung his own song, with his less technically perfect but more expressive voice. [6]

While it's not as perfect a song as Forever or God Only Knows, two songs it is clearly an attempt to emulate, it's still extremely good, and one of the best things on the album, and it makes one wish that Love and Dennis Wilson had been able to work together more often.

Funky Pretty

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Mike Love and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson, Al Jardine, Blondie Chaplin, Ricky Fataar and Mike Love

The only song, other than Sail On Sailor, contributed by Brian Wilson to the Holland project proper was this track on which he contributed nearly all the instruments (Carl Wilson added some guitar, and Fataar some percussion, but Brian played the drums as well as probably playing all the keyboard parts).

Musically, this is not all that interesting as a song, but is fascinating as a pointer to Brian Wilson's musical direction at the time and for the next few years. The entire track is based around Moog, with Moog parts in three ranges (a squelchy, fuzzy bass part, a mid-range part in the same range as the piano, and a high counter-melody), with only the most rudimentary drum part and no real connection to conventional rock music at all.

While the song's title sums up the feel very well (the vocals have a great, soulful feel, while there's an ethereal beauty to the Moog parts), the lyrics as a whole are fairly pointless, combining the worst of both Rieley (pointless prettiness without any sense) and Love (an obsession with astrology, a long list of place names, and a slightly lecherous tone). The vocals, though, are extraordinary. For those playing along at home, Carl Wilson takes the verses (and the verse backing vocals), Jardine takes over on "where's my spark in the dark?", Fataar "Glow glow glow come on glow", Chaplin on "the funky pretty flame in my heart" and Love "me and my Pisces lady are apart."

On the second chorus, Chaplin sings "Cos it's a silent night in the sea", Jardine "and if you're cosmically conscious you'll see", Fataar "why she's a princess incarnate to me" and Love "daughter of Neptune, the ruler of the sea". Carl Wilson takes the middle section with the listing of place names, and Chaplin takes the fade. The fade-out would be the perfect end for the album, but then we have...

Mt Vernon And Fairway (A Fairy Tale)

Songwriters: Brian Wilson (with Carl Wilson and Jack Rieley)

Lead vocalist: Jack Rieley (with Brian and Carl Wilson)

Possibly the most controversial thing the Beach Boys ever released, this is, depending on who you talk to, either one of Brian Wilson's greatest masterpieces or a sad record of a once-great talent's decline.

When Holland was being recorded, Brian Wilson was at a low ebb, mentally and creatively, and wanted little or nothing to do with the recording process. Instead, he found himself listening over and over to Sail Away by Randy Newman [7] .

He discovered that while he was listening to this, he was able to get into a creative mood, and wrote a fairytale, about a young prince who lived at Mount Vernon And Fairway (the address where Mike Love had grown up) and who, while alone in his bedroom, discovered a magic transistor radio, which normally played the music of Bach, but sometimes was possessed by "the Pied Piper from the faraway land of night", whose music was unlike anything the prince had ever heard.

Unsurprisingly, when he presented this fairytale to the other band members and suggested it go on Holland, their reaction was not hugely enthusiastic, and Brian was apparently so discouraged that he didn't finish the story (Jack Rieley apparently supplied the rather abrupt ending, as a result). Nonetheless it was agreed to package the result as a 7 inch single with the album (it appears as a bonus track on CD releases), and the finished piece is one of the most interesting, ambitious, and beautiful things Wilson has ever created.

Rieley narrates the story, which is clearly the work of someone who is not especially articulate, but which makes up for in emotional honesty what it lacks in craft, while under it we have electronic sound effects, piano music, and snatches of vocal music, mostly repeated lines ("Pied Piper, I'd better get back in bed," "I'm the Pied Piper in the radio", "Dom dom King dom"). The effect is somewhere between Peter And The Wolf and Nilsson's The Point, with tiny

moments of beauty that are never developed into full songs, but drift away like someone tuning the radio to another station.

The music itself has had more appreciation since it was released, without the spoken narration and sound effects, as Fairy Tale Music on the Good Vibrations: Thirty Years Of The Beach Boys box set, but while the story is not the work of someone with any great skill in language, it’s still joyful and perfectly conveys the wonder of a lonely teenager, sat in his room listening to the radio, hit from out of the blue with music only he can hear, more wonderful and exciting even than Bach.

In Concert

Ask ten different Beach Boys fans their favourite period for the band as a live act, and you'll get ten different answers. Over the years, the Beach Boys' stage show changed radically, and each period showcased a different aspect of the band. Some may prefer the shows from the late 60s and early 70s, centred around the gentle material from Wild Honey, Friends and Sunflower. Others prefer the "Brian's back" era of the late 70s, when the now-husky genius returned to the stage to add the quirky Love You material to otherwise nostalgia-driven shows. Yet others will argue for the 1993 box set tour, with its unplugged sets, positioning the band squarely in the 'classic rock' field, or the 2008 UK tour, or the 2012 reunion tour, both of which managed the difficult feat of balancing both the artistic and nostalgic aspects of the band's appeal.

But more than any other period, people mention the 1972-74 period as a highlight for the Beach Boys' live shows. In some ways, this is entirely for good reasons – this was the period when they had the most adventurous live sets, and had some of the best backing musicians they would ever have.

In other respects, though, it betrays a certain insecurity among Beach Boys fans. The 1972-74 live band were wonderful, but this was also the period where the band was the most acceptable to the kind of people who talk about 'real music'. Yes, the band had none of the tacky accoutrements that damaged their later shows – no cheerleaders, Hawaiian shirts, cheap synthesisers or attempts at rapping – but on the downside there was a certain obviousness to the arrangements, with delicacy being ignored in favour of a riffy, heavy, guitar-based sound.

This is not to say that these performances were bad, by any means – they do

deserve their reputation – but they were good in a very particular way and represent a vision of the band as long-haired, bearded, guitar-toting rockers, that practically oozes testosterone. If that's not the version of the band you're interested in – if you have less interest in rock music than in pop – then adjust your expectations accordingly.

While this album is compiled from many shows, over two separate tours (the record company having rejected an early single-LP version, with only material from the winter 1972 tour), it is an authentic record of what the band sounded like live at this time, as those who have heard the many audience recordings from this period can attest.

I will have less to talk about with this album on a track-by-track basis than for other albums, as I have already spoken about most of these songs in the context of their studio versions. There are some general notes which are applicable to all the songs, though.

Firstly, as stated above, this is much less pop than rock. In general, the songs are sped up and more dominated by guitar than the studio versions. There are also two drummers on most tracks, and at least one of the drummers uses far more cymbal than was ever used on a record produced by Brian Wilson.

Secondly, the harmonies are very different from what one might expect. With Brian Wilson absent from the touring band and Bruce Johnston having quit, the low and middle ends of the harmony stack are far more prominent than the high end. In later years, of course, the band would hire outside falsetto singers to take those parts, as they became more concerned with reproducing the sound of the hit records than with playing their new music, but at this point their set was dominated by songs which had little or no falsetto anyway. On the other hand, Dennis Wilson's voice is far more audible in the harmony stack than it was most of the time – at this point, he was still unable to play the drums because of his hand injury, and so he was singing a lot more (he very rarely sang while

drumming).

What’s perhaps most noticeable is the repertoire. This was the Beach Boys’ third live album in ten years, and yet of its twenty songs, only six had appeared on either of the previous two (and none had appeared on both). This was a band that was still growing, still changing up its setlist regularly, and mixing hits, obscurities and new songs with more concern for putting on a good show than for fitting someone’s preconceived idea of what a Beach Boys show ‘should’ be.

With those points in mind, on to the songs themselves.

line-up

Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Blondie Chaplin, Ricky Fataar

with backing band members Billy Hinsche, Ed Carter, Robert Kenyatta, Mike Kowalski, Carli Muñoz

Sail On Sailor

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Van Dyke Parks, Ray Kennedy, Tandyn Almer and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Blondie Chaplin

Unsurprisingly, the opening track from the band's then-new album sounds very similar to the studio version. The main differences are a more prominent bassline, a slight increase in tempo, and the loss of the 'Morse code' guitar part, but otherwise this is much like the record.

Sloop John B

Songwriter: trad arr Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson and Mike Love

The second in a miniature set of songs about sailing that starts In Concert, this is, like much of the record, a stripped-down, simplified, but relatively faithful arrangement of the hit. The orchestration is obviously not there (though the flute intro remains), but there are some nice instrumental touches, like the twelve-string guitar being doubled by an analogue synth.

The most notable differences from the studio version are Carl Wilson, rather than Brian, taking the lead vocal on the verses, the lack of the a capella break (in general the harmonies suffer more than the instrumental parts on this album), and the frenetic pace at which it's taken (I actually felt my heart racing when listening to this with headphones, it goes at such a pace).

It's not the best live version of the song (that would be the version on Live In

London), but it’s a perfectly decent performance.

The Trader

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson and Mike Love

Much as with Sail On Sailor, this was recorded close enough to the release of the studio version that it is, if not indistinguishable, then still very, very similar. The most notable difference is a prominent bongo track in the left channel, and the inescapable fact that when performed live the transition between the two sections of the song is less abrupt.

You Still Believe In Me

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Tony Asher

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine with Carl Wilson

A very creditable attempt at what is possibly the most difficult song from Pet Sounds to perform live. Obviously, there was no possibility at this point of them reproducing the complexities of the record on stage, but the solutions here (replacing the plucked piano strings and falsetto on the intro with guitar and

Moog, for example) work very well at giving the same feel.

This is also the best example of the band's vocal work on the album. While Jardine can't reproduce the delicacy of Brian Wilson's original falsetto vocal part, his stronger, richer tone gives the vocal a pleading note which works just as well, and the transition between his vocal and Carl Wilson on the line "I wanna cry" (which goes out of Jardine's range) is handled extraordinarily well. The harmonies on this show that while the band were hampered at this point by having their vocal ranges concentrated in the mid range, they could still pull off some beautiful vocals when required.

California Girls

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

Pretty much exactly what you'd expect a live version of California Girls to sound like. The harmonies on this are a bit ragged, and we hear Dennis at the beginning exhorting the crowd to sing along, but you already know what this sounds like. Love's joking "ooh, we mean it so much!" at the end seems to confirm that at this point, the band still saw their biggest hits as something of a joke and a distraction from their more artistic work, though that attitude would soon change.

Darlin'

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

This kind of material is where the band at this time excelled – songs that depend on a driving rhythm and a lead vocal performance. While the horns from the original are sadly missed, the addition of Hammond organ, along with the best drum and percussion track on the album (some great cowbell work and bongos) makes this the first song on In Concert that it's safe to say is a definite improvement over the original.

Marcella

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Jack Rieley and Tandyn Almer

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

This track mostly differs from the studio version in that the guitar parts have been beefed up substantially – unsurprisingly given that the original's glossy sonic sheen is pretty much unreproducible in a live setting. The vocals here again shine – this version of the band was not wonderful at the close harmonies that normally defined the band, but were as good as any vocal group ever at singing interweaving, independent solo lines in counterpoint with each other, and this track gives a great opportunity to show that off. The one flaw in this track is the percussion part in the left channel, which goes slightly out of time on occasion.

This arrangement of the song, as opposed to the studio version, is the basis for the version played live by Brian Wilson's touring band in recent years, and is also the arrangement used on the Beach Boys' fiftieth anniversary reunion tour.

Caroline, No

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Tony Asher

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

This, again, has a simplified arrangement (no percussive intro, just straight into the first verse), but this was never a song that needed much in the way of orchestration, and the simple electric piano part (presumably Dennis Wilson) and flute embellishments work perfectly (though the solo gets a little too close to lounge jazz for my own tastes). If you have a singer as good as Carl Wilson and a song as good as this, it's impossible for it not to sound great.

Leaving This Town

Songwriters: Carl Wilson, Blondie Chaplin, Ricky Fataar and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Blondie Chaplin

The upside: the organ solo on this (played by Billy Hinsche) has some real

feeling and invention to it.

The downside: this is thirty seconds longer than the already-ridiculously-overlong version on Holland.

Probably sounds really good if you’re stoned.

Heroes & Villains

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine and Carl Wilson

The early-70s band’s version of this track is spectacular. Al Jardine, on the verses, sounds much more comfortable than Brian Wilson does on the single. Carl Wilson sings the Bicycle Rider lyrics on the choruses (and Mike Love adds in the “heroes, a-heroes, a-heroes and a-villains” chant), and again the band are given the chance to shine vocally, including on the only a capella sections on the entire album (for the scat section and the last “I’ve been in this town” section), again singing wonderful cascading, overlapping vocal lines like no other band could do. Easily the highlight of the album.

Funky Pretty

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Mike Love and Jack Rieley

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson, Al Jardine, Blondie Chaplin, Ricky Fataar and Mike Love

The consensus among Beach Boys fans is that this is a massive improvement on the studio version, and that this is ‘how the song should always have sounded.’

Like most Beach Boys fan consensus, this is bunkum. On Holland, Funky Pretty is a mediocre song brought up to near-greatness by a Spartan, Moog-dominated production that makes it sound almost like a piece of experimental electronica. Adding guitar riffs, honky tonk piano and a ‘proper’ rock drum track, and cutting out most of the Moog parts, turns it into something that sounds like a Rolling Stones B-side. (It’s no surprise that the band regularly covered Jumpin’ Jack Flash in shows at this point, or that Blondie Chaplin spent most of the 1990s and 2000s as a sideman in the Stones’ touring band). This is competent, but nothing compared to the magnificent studio version.

Let The Wind Blow

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

Of all the more radical reworkings in the band’s live set, this is the one that works the best. While the original track, on Wild Honey, has a gorgeous delicacy

to it, this turns it into a gospel ballad that wouldn't be out of place on a Ray Charles or Al Green record, with the original's shared lead vocal turned into a solo for Carl Wilson. The wordless backing vocal lines from the original are dropped until the last verse, and other than the answering lines and some occasional touches from Jardine, the only vocals we pay attention to here are from Carl Wilson – the whole track is built around his vocal performance. Luckily, it's an absolutely stellar performance, so while, when hearing this, one still misses the ethereal beauty of the studio version, this has its own strengths.

Help Me, Rhonda

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

The oddest rearrangement on the album is this, with all the arrangement details blurred out into a nondescript guitar boogie with little charm and less grace, an excuse for jamming on mediocre solos. Bizarrely, the band stuck with this arrangement as late as the mid-90s (and Brian Wilson still uses it for his solo tours), though Mike Love's touring "Beach Boys" (and the reunion tour of 2012) thankfully reverted to the original arrangement. Al Jardine does his usual spectacular job, and the audience sound enthused, but it just seems rather cruel to do this to a song that never did anything to harm the band.

Surfer Girl

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine and Mike Love

Mike Love's introduction to this, emphasising how old the song is, is another pointer to how embarrassed the band were at this time to be doing this material.

Despite this, though, they do a lovely job on this. The harmonies are huskier and more fragile than on the record – these are definitely Beach Men, not Boys – but they still sound good.

Wouldn't It Be Nice

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Tony Asher and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine and Mike Love

It shows the way the band had improved as musicians over a relatively short time that while on Live In London they cut out a huge chunk of this song (the part where the tempo changes in "you know it seems..."), here they not only perform that section but it gets what sounds like the biggest cheer of the disc.

Jardine once again does a splendid job on the lead vocals, although some of the backing vocals are perfunctory.

We Got Love

Songwriters: Blondie Chaplin, Ricky Fataar and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Ricky Fataar

The one new song of the album was this, a song which had been originally intended for Holland before it was dropped at the last minute. It's another very pleasant, but unspectacular, track from Chaplin and Fataar, this one possibly influenced by Allen Toussaint's song Riverboat, which had been recorded by Van Dyke Parks on Discover America around the same time, and which has the line "We got love" emphasised several times, and a generally similar feel. (Toussaint's song would actually have fit well on Holland, and may have also inspired Steamboat).

The lyrics, which sound like Love's work primarily, are a generic call to treat other people nicely along with some new age stuff equating evolution and karma.

This is the last Chaplin/Fataar collaboration to feature on a Beach Boys recording – Chaplin departed from the band, acrimoniously, before the end of 1973 after disagreements with Rieley. Fataar would remain with them until the end of 1974, and leave on slightly better terms, but by the time the next Beach Boys album came out, both would be long gone.

Don't Worry Baby

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Roger Christian

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine and Carl Wilson

Given that they have a bigger band to play with here than they did when recording the single, the band decide to stop pretending and just play this as Be My Baby, right down to the drum intro, and until the lead vocal comes in this bears far more resemblance to the Spector classic than to the Beach Boys' track (prompting two waves of recognition-applause from the audience – one at the beginning when the track starts, and another when the lead vocal starts and they realise what song it actually is).

Jardine and Carl Wilson split Brian Wilson's lead part between them the same way they did on Heroes & Villains, with Wilson taking the higher part in the choruses and Jardine taking the slightly lower verses, and both do a very good job, though neither quite has the fragility of Brian Wilson's original. Jardine messes up some of the lyrics, but in a recoverable way (and oddly is mixed far to one side), but the harmonies are spot on, and this is as good a version of this song as one could hope for given the absence of a 22-year-old Brian Wilson.

Surfin' USA

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Chuck Berry

Lead vocalist: Mike Love with Al Jardine

This is about what you'd expect – a little faster than the original, the guitars a little more distorted, and with Al Jardine attempting Brian Wilson's falsetto part. A rockier, more muscular live version of the song, but basically what you'd expect to hear from a 1970s Beach Boys show.

Good Vibrations

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson and Mike Love

This is about as accurate a rendition of an impossible-to-perform song as one could imagine (understandably, as the song is too big a hit, and too much of a masterpiece, to dare mess with). The big change made to the arrangement, and one the band kept through to the late 90s, was to extend the 'gotta keep those lovin' good' section to several times its original length (and change the lyrics on that line to 'happenin' with you' instead of 'with her'), to allow for an audience sing-along section and a scatted show of vocal dexterity. Other than that, the only notable differences from the record are those made to make the song performable at all live (the 'theremin' part being played on a ribbon synthesiser, rather lower in the mix than on the record, no odd instruments like the Jew's harp, the triplets in the chorus being played on guitar rather than 'cello).

Fun Fun Fun

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

And the album ends with a rather chugging, graceless, performance of this song, which trades the original's pop energy for a 70s heaviness. Hearing this version, it becomes much clearer why this song was a natural choice for a duet between the Beach Boys and Status Quo in 1996.

Overall, this is probably the best Beach Boys live album one could hope for, and at times it matches or even surpasses the studio recordings. If it lacks the subtlety and gentleness of the best of the band's studio work, that's more a reflection of just how special that studio work is, rather than a cause for negative judgement on the band themselves. With current technology, and on current budgets, it's possible to reproduce the textures of Brian Wilson's production on stage, but in the early 70s this was as good as it would be reasonable to expect it to get. It will never be my favourite Beach Boys album, but it's a good one, and one that can be useful for dispelling some of the myths about the group. But there's a definite sense from this that you had to be there.

15 Big Ones

The years between 1972, when Holland was released, and 1976, when this album came out, were the most important in the Beach Boys' career. It's no lie to say that the band here is utterly unrecognisable as the one which, a handful of years earlier, had been recording extended suites with flutes and spoken poetry segments.

The reasons for this change are far too complex to be covered in full in a book like this, which is devoted to the music more than the personalities, but a huge number of factors converged to change the band permanently, and not for the better. Firstly, both Blondie Chaplin and Ricky Fataar quit the group, and Jack Rieley stopped managing them, and thus also stopped collaborating with the Wilson brothers as a lyricist.

On top of this, Murry Wilson, the Wilson brothers' father and the band's early manager, died of a heart attack. The loss of their father caused the already-vulnerable Brian Wilson to descend into his worst ever period of depression (this period is the source of the urban legends about Wilson spending years at a time in bed), while Dennis Wilson's substance abuse and alcohol problems became even worse.

But at the same time, the band had suddenly become, for the first time in a decade, the most popular band in America. The OPEC crisis in 1973 had precipitated a wave of nostalgia for the late 1950s and early 1960s in American culture, and with this came a reappraisal of the band's early surf and car material. All Summer Long was used on the soundtrack of the hit film American Graffiti, and a rather shoddily-packaged double hits collection, Endless Summer, went to number one in 1974, spent three years on the charts and sold three

million copies. A follow-up, Spirit Of America, went top ten and gold despite having few hits on it. The Beach Boys went from playing mid-sized college venues to headlining stadium gigs.

All this meant that there was a huge appetite for new Beach Boys material – but only if it came from Brian Wilson, and was in the same mould as the early hits. After intensive therapy with the controversial therapist Eugene Landy (who will show up much more in volume three), Wilson was ‘well enough’ to return to the studio and produce a new album, and to rejoin the touring band.

15 Big Ones was released with a massive publicity campaign, based around the phrase “Brian’s Back”, and became the band’s first top ten album in a decade, as well as spawning two hit singles. But many were shocked by what they heard. 15 Big Ones was a mix of new material and 50s covers, and Carl and Dennis Wilson as good as disowned it before it even came out, saying that they had believed the plan was to record the oldies as a warm-up before doing a full album of new material.

The arrangements were idiosyncratic, with much use of Moog, but the vocals were what shocked listeners the most. Brian and Dennis’ voices had been almost destroyed by alcohol and drug abuse, with Brian having lost his falsetto (though there is some doubt as to whether this was a deliberate decision on his part, as he wanted to sound more manly), while Dennis’ vocals were a husky rasp, sounding like nothing so much as Tom Waits. The harmonies are sloppy, ragged, and often off-key.

There’s still much to like about 15 Big Ones, but as with many Beach Boys records to come, there’s a lot of music that sounds truly terrible, too. And the question then becomes how one interprets this music, as a listener. Is it a genius doing something too clever for the listener to get? A genius trying and failing to do something clever? A mentally ill man incapable of coherent work? An act of rebellion from someone being forced to work with a band he no longer cared

about? A subtle musical joke?

At different times, the conclusion I come to comes out different ways, and I suspect that the true answer has elements of all the above in it. But the fact remains that in 1976, all the Beach Boys had to do to cement their artistic reputation, and re-establish themselves commercially, was to release something even vaguely competent. They didn't manage to do it, and it would be thirty-six years before they released another top ten album.

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Ricky Fataar (uncredited), Bruce Johnston (uncredited)

Rock And Roll Music

Songwriter: Chuck Berry

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

The opening track, and lead-off single, sums up the whole project in a nutshell. It's a cover of the Chuck Berry classic, with an inventive backing track largely played by Brian Wilson, but given a curiously flat mix, and with an unimaginative "rock, roll, rockin' and roll" backing vocal chant that has none of Wilson's normal flair for vocal arrangements. And over this, Mike Love sounds like almost a parody of himself. Recording a song by Chuck Berry (and one

which had a famous cover version by the Beatles, to boot) invites comparison with some of the greatest vocalists of the rock era. Love's vocal is neither as witty as Berry's nor as exuberant as John Lennon's, just a flat statement, and we're left wondering why anyone would want to dance with him.

The superior (though still not very good) single mix of this track went to number 5 in the US charts, more because of the immense affection the band were held in at this time than because of any redeeming qualities in the record itself, making it the band's biggest hit since Good Vibrations a decade before.

It's OK

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Dennis Wilson

The second single on the album, and the first original, actually dates from 1974, and was recorded with Ricky Fataar on drums (most songs on 15 Big Ones actually feature Dennis Wilson on drums, the first where that was the case for some years), along with members of Roy Wood's band Wizzard on saxophone [8] .

Essentially a return to the feel of Do It Again, this was the first 'fun in the sun' Beach Boys song to be released since that song eight years earlier, and it's enjoyable enough, but there's a sense of diminishing returns here, with its "in the sum-sum-summertime" chant and banal lyrics. The track mostly works because of the saxophone line and Dennis Wilson's gloriously goofy bass vocals, but it's a creative dead end. As a single, this went to number 29 in the US charts. The

song remained in the band’s live setlist for the next two years, and has been a regular in the set of Mike Love’s touring Beach Boys in recent years.

Had To Phone Ya

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Mike Love and Diane Rovell

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson, Brian Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love

The first really strong track on the album is this one, originally written for and recorded by (American) Spring, a vocal group consisting of Brian Wilson’s wife Marilyn (who sings backing vocals here) and her sister Diane (credited as a co-writer of the song).

The song is a miniature, only two minutes eleven seconds long, but has a typically Wilsonesque chord sequence, based loosely around the Pet Sounds outtake Trombone Dixie, full of major ninths and sixths, and a wonderful section (starting with the line “it lifts my spirits...”) where the melody climbs as the bassline steadily descends underneath.

The arrangement, too, is outstanding, with interjections from clarinets having much the same function that the Moogs in Wilson’s other arrangements of the time do, and with every band member getting a couple of lines of lead vocal in turn, ending with Brian’s new ‘low and manly’ voice, singing “come on, come on and answer the phone” (and a very buried Marilyn saying “Hi Brian” right as the song fades out).

While Brian’s beautiful voice had been more-or-less destroyed, and would never really return, but his gruff vocals here still show a musicality, and an emotional honesty, that makes them as good in their way as his earlier performances. The voice may be gone, but the artistry is still there.

Chapel Of Love

Songwriters: Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and Phil Spector

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson

And here we get to one of the tracks that it’s almost impossible to judge, except possibly as outsider music. This is a cover of a track Wilson admired enormously, but with a wildly eccentric arrangement – cymbals playing triplets, when Wilson normally avoided them, a bank of saxophones droning, stabs from an ARP string synthesiser, and Moog bass. Then over this Brian Wilson sings what sounds like a serious attempt at the lead in his low, gruff voice, with Love doing a competent job on the bass vocals – but Wilson then screeches answering vocal parts, sounding like a small child doing a joke voice. Is this an experiment that didn’t quite work out? Is it a joke? Is it just Wilson being enormously lazy? There’s no possible way to tell. It’s not actually unlistenable, in its own strange way, but its qualities are...orthogonal to those one normally looks for in music.

An alternative mix of this exists which is slightly less eccentric, with some additional backing vocals, but that mix makes it no clearer what the intent of the track was.

Everyone’s In Love With You

Songwriter: Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

This track is a much more conventional one than anything on the album up to this point, and the explanation lies in the credits – while Brian Wilson is still credited as producer, Love is credited as arranger, and Daryl Dragon as vocal arranger (Dragon’s wife Toni Tennille sings the high vocals here).

This is Love in mellow mode, much like on Big Sur, as he sings to someone who is loved by everyone, but who “can’t give your love to only one” – the person in question being the Maharishi, though this is not made explicit in the lyric. The backing is very, very loosely inspired by Bach, probably via Procol Harum, as the track has more than a little of the feel of Whiter Shade Of Pale about it, and jazz musician Charles Lloyd (a fellow follower of the Maharishi, and a member of the Beach Boys’ touring band at this point) provides some nice flute.

This song is clearly important to Love, as he rerecorded it in 1978 (for his unreleased solo country album Country Love) and again in 2004 (for his unreleased album which at various times went under the name Unleash The Love and Mike Love Not War) and regularly includes it in sets by the touring Beach Boys. However, it was less popular with the public – when released as the third single from 15 Big Ones, it failed to reach the charts.

Talk To Me

Songwriters: Joe Seneca/Bob Crewe, Frank C. Slay Jr. and Frederick A. Picariello

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

Another track where it's literally impossible to understand what Brian Wilson could have been thinking. The bulk of the song is a rather plodding cover of Talk To Me, a fairly nondescript (12)/(8) R&B ballad, originally recorded by Little Willie John, and it's passable enough, though Carl Wilson sounds quite bored. But then, for no discernible reason, at the end of the middle eight, the song is interrupted by ten bars of the uptempo rocker Tallahassee Lassie, a minor hit for Freddie "Boom Boom" Cannon, which is in a different key, tempo, and time signature, and whose lyrics have no connection with those of the earlier song. After these ten bars, the original song is resumed. It sounds for all the world like a mistake, and many people listening in this download age will assume they have a corrupted file, but it's totally deliberate.

That Same Song

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson

And suddenly we get an absolutely joyous gospel-flavoured track, with an enthusiastically gruff Brian turning in one of his best vocal performances of the album, as he tracks the evolution of music from Gregorian chant to rock and roll.

It’s utterly simple – for much of the track it’s just Brian on piano and organ and Dennis tapping a cymbal, while Brian and the band sing, although there are occasional passages with more instruments (most notably saxophone, provided here as on many of these tracks by old Wrecking Crew stalwarts Steve Douglas and Jay Migliori) – but the vocal performance is filled with such irrepressible joy that one can’t help but be swept up by it.

T.M. Song

Songwriters: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

Easily the most “Brian” song on 15 Big Ones, this ode to transcendental meditation has more inventiveness in seventy-four seconds than most of the rest of the album has in total. Starting with twenty seconds of scripted arguing, reminiscent of some of the attempts at comedy on the band’s very earliest recordings, ending with Al saying “phew, it’s time for me to meditate”, we then have two fairly straightforward verses, describing the effects of meditation, before going into a middle section that almost defies description, with a melody line wandering all over the place while the track speeds up and slows down under the line “sometimes it goes real fast and other times it goes real slow”. There’s then yet another eight-bar section, an uptempo tag which tells you “transcendental meditation really works for me good/more much more than I thought it would”.

The track manages to remind one simultaneously of the jokey material on the earliest albums and of both Smiley Smile and Friends, and so probably should have been the kind of thing people who wanted Brian to be “back” were expecting. But it wasn’t.

Palisades Park

Songwriter: Chuck Barris

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

Side two opens with a second Freddie “Boom Boom” Cannon cover, this time of a song written by Chuck Barris [9] .

The original version of this had been a huge influence on the band, to the extent that Brian Wilson had more-or-less blatantly ripped it off twice, for County Fair and Amusement Parks USA, and this seems a far more respectful take on the song than many of the other covers. It’s also the only track on the album where all the instrumentation is played by old Wrecking Crew members – almost every other track has instrumentation provided by the Wilson brothers, touring guitarists Ed Carter and Billy Hinsche, and then session players only augmenting the band for instruments like saxophone, but here the old gang are all back together.

The track is a fairly straight take on the song, with the only new addition being the “run run running, now the rides are running” backing vocals, replacing an organ part from the original, and Carl Wilson gives the vocal his all. The song itself is not especially inspired, but the track is fun.

Susie Cincinnati

Songwriter: Al Jardine

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

This track of Jardine's actually dates back to January 1970, and so features Bruce Johnston on backing vocals. It had actually been released twice before, as the B-side to both Add Some Music and to the 1974 single Child Of Winter, in two different mono mixes, and the stereo version here is apparently those two mono mixes synced together.

One of the most enjoyable, catchiest things Jardine has ever written, this is a simple four-chord rocker (with a key change for the last verse), with incredibly silly lyrics about a taxi driver in Cincinnati (whose "looks aren't exactly a plus/but it doesn't matter to us"). It's an absolutely ridiculous song, but it knows it's ridiculous, and Jardine sings it with such enthusiasm it's impossible not to grin, especially when Brian Wilson's harmonica impersonates a car horn. The song became a B-side yet again when it was released on the flip of Everyone's In Love With You.

A Casual Look

Songwriter: Ed Wells

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Al Jardine

A straight cover of a minor doo-wop record, originally by The Six Teens, with the gender swapped in the verse lyrics. The track's not bad, except for some utterly horrific nasal vocals by Love on the first verse. Jardine almost rescues it with a wonderful performance on the second verse, but by then the damage has been done.

Blueberry Hill

Songwriters: Vincent Rose and Al Lewis

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

This cover of the old standard works really well for the first verse, with just string bass, clip-clop percussion, and Love's vocal, and it sounds like we might be in for something very special. But then a whole wall of sound comes in (this is another track that features mostly Wrecking Crew members, though Brian and Carl Wilson and Bruce Johnston contribute instrumentally) and overwhelms Love's voice, to no real purpose.

Back Home

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson

Given that the theme of the album is looking back at the past (the fifteen “big ones” of the title refers both to the number of songs and to the length of time since the band’s first recordings), it makes sense for them to dig up a song that dated back to the earliest days of the band’s career.

This simple four-chord country song, with much the same feel as some of Brian Wilson’s work with Gary Usher (notably Sacramento and That’s Just The Way I Feel) was first attempted by the band in 1963, and then again in 1970 in a version with totally different lyrics. This version mostly reverts to the 1963 version, though it replaces its middle eight with a simple chant of “Back home, I’ll spend my summer, back home”, and the track mostly gets by on the enthusiasm of Brian Wilson’s croaky lead vocals. It’s not a great song, but it’s an enjoyable performance, and remained in the band’s setlist for a couple of years. Brian Wilson also included this in his sets on his first ever solo tour, in 1999.

In The Still Of The Night

Songwriter: Fred Parris

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

An almost note-for-note identical cover version of the 1950s doo-wop song, originally a hit for The Five Satins. The only notable difference is the lead vocal, where the silky, beautiful vocal of the original is replaced by Dennis Wilson’s wounded bellow. While not sounding as ravaged here as he did in later years, his voice is clearly raspy, and he’s already started slurring his words slightly. Brian Wilson plays everything except the drums (played by Dennis) and contributes what may be his last really good falsetto on the tag, where he sounds huskier than previously, but still capable of hitting the notes and with a fragile tone that is in some ways an improvement on the perfection of his 60s work.

Just Once In My Life

Songwriters: Gerry Goffin, Carole King and Phil Spector

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson and Brian Wilson

And the album ends with a real reunion, with both Ricky Fataar (on percussion) and Bruce Johnston (on backing vocals) rejoining their old band for this cover of the Righteous Brothers' classic.

The original on which this was based was an attempt at following up You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling with something written to the same formula, and was an absolute masterpiece. Wisely, here the band stick almost exactly to the template of the original, capturing most of the crucial elements of Jack Nitzsche's magnificent arrangement, but they make a few subtle changes, notably swapping lines between verses to give the lyric a better through-line (in the original "I've given up on schemes..." was in the second verse, while "there's just one little dream..." was in the first).

Carl Wilson takes the verses and the middle section here, turning in by far his best performance of the album, going from a gentle, placid start with "There's a lot of things I want..." to a hopeless but still kind "that old pot of gold ain't so easy to find..." to almost screaming on "I can't give you the world, but I'll work hard for you girl", to begging on "do this for me, baby". The range he displays here is just extraordinary.

Brian, meanwhile, takes the choruses, and here his broken, wounded voice works perfectly, as he sings “just once in my life, let me hold onto a good thing I’ve found”. It’s an extraordinarily moving performance.

It doesn’t quite beat the original, which is one of the greatest singles ever recorded, but it comes close enough that it’s not a ridiculous comparison, and at the end of a record which even the most charitable listener would have to concede was patchy, it provides, at last, some proof that this once-great band still had the potential for greatness inside them.

The Beach Boys Love You

The follow-up to 15 Big Ones may well be the most controversial album the band ever did, with fans almost evenly divided between those who love it and those who hate it. In a recent (totally unscientific) poll on one fan forum, Love You made the top ten both of fans' favourite and least favourite albums.

And there's a good reason for this. Love You is, quite simply, unlike anything else ever recorded, not just by the Beach Boys but by anyone. It's almost impossible to get across to people who haven't heard it just how unlike anything else any major band has ever done this is. Possibly the best way to explain its sound is by a hypothetical:

Imagine playing J.S. Bach a Phil Spector record, then telling him "you have an hour to write as many songs that sound like that as possible", and locking him in a room with Jonathan Richman as a lyricist. Then take those songs and give them to Tom Waits to record, but with the only instruments allowed being a Moog with its settings stuck on "fart sound" and a single snare drum.

While the result wouldn't exactly be The Beach Boys Love You, it would probably be close enough on a first approximation. It's an album where the vast majority of the instrumentation is played by Brian, and is as rudimentary as that implies. Given its release in 1977, it would actually be the only sensible response by a major band to punk, were there any evidence that Brian Wilson had ever heard a punk record at this point – as it is, we have to see it as convergent evolution. This seems to be the cause of the great split in Beach Boys fandom over this album: very roughly, anyone who became a Beach Boys fan before punk despises Love You, anyone who grew up listening to punk and post-punk music seems to get it instinctively.

This is one of only two Beach Boys albums to be made up entirely of previously-unreleased Brian Wilson songs (the other being Smiley Smile) and is as personal a statement as Pet Sounds, Smile or Smiley Smile. And I am one of those who think this is one of the pillars on which the Beach Boys' artistic reputation rests. Certainly this is the last album by the group that anyone could possibly argue was great – and there are only two after this that one could reasonably argue are even listenable (though the band's members would make plenty of good music solo).

It's not an easy listen, though. It's bare, minimalist, raspy and human. Apparently Carl Wilson did a lot to sweeten the recordings before their release (he's credited as 'mixdown producer', with Brian Wilson credited as 'producer', but supposedly he did a lot more than that implies), which just makes one wonder what on Earth this could have sounded like before the sweetening.

One thing that must be addressed before we get to the album proper, though, is the claim by some that the people who like this album do so because they're fetishising mental illness, and that Love You itself is 'a product of mental illness'.

This is nonsense.

Love You isn't "a product of mental illness" – it's a product of an artist who happened to be living with a mental illness. Yes, it wouldn't be the same if Brian had been mentally better, but likewise none of his music would have been the same if he'd been able to hear in both ears, and we don't call Pet Sounds "a product of physical disability". Just having a mental illness doesn't make one magically able to make music of the quality of Love You – I worked for several years on a psychiatric ward, and several of the people on that ward fancied themselves musicians, so I can tell you that from personal experience.

Conversely, having a mental illness doesn't suddenly remove all talent, intelligence and humour from someone who has those things when they're well.

The narrative that mental illness is in some way romantic or confers mystical talent upon those who have it is definitely a pernicious one that needs to be fought. But just as pernicious is the opposite myth – that because someone has bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia, or whatever, they instantly become unable to do anything or make any rational decision. People with mental illnesses can be capable of creating great art – even great art that stems from their illness. Or should we dismiss Van Gogh and William Blake, too?

No, Love You wouldn't be the same album if Brian Wilson hadn't been suffering from a mental illness at the time – but that's a good thing. Not a good thing that he was ill, but a good thing that while ill he was able to create great art. Personally, I think we need more art from people with mental illnesses – they're marginalised, and their opinions and thoughts more or less ignored or mocked, in this society.

But this isn't something that has to be treated as outsider music and listened to as one would listen to Wesley Willis. This is a record that had a rave review on its release from Patti Smith, that Peter Buck considers one of the greatest ever and that, most importantly, Brian Wilson himself often says is his favourite by the band. This is a strange, but beautiful, work by one of the greatest songwriters ever.

To those who have ears, let them hear.

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Bruce Johnston (uncredited)

Let Us Go On This Way

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson and Mike Love

And Love You starts with a clear statement of intent – with a riff almost identical to that of Gimme Some Lovin' played on a cheap-sounding electric organ and a Moog bass, while a single snare drum thwacks on the off-beat and Carl Wilson grunts.

This is pop-R&B for the post-punk age, the , theSpencer Davis Group in a world where the drum-kit and the electric guitar had never been invented. Over a simple, grunting riff played on a farting Moog, stabbing chords on an organ, Jay Miglori's baritone sax and a solitary snare drum, Carl Wilson soul-shouts "To get you babe I went through the wringer/Ain't gonna let you slip through my fingers". The verse is simplicity itself, but then for the chorus line we get something totally different – all the instruments drop out, replaced by a piano, and the two-chord riffs we've had so far are replaced by seven chords in three bars, as the ecstatic harmonies come in – "God, please let us go on this way".

To those who've been following the band's career, this can't help but be a reminder of the last time the Beach Boys invoked the deity in this way – the similarly gospel-infused He Come Down – but while the harmonies here work in the same way, here they're shattered voices. The Wilson brothers at this point

had destroyed their voices with a combination of cocaine, alcohol and smoking, though Carl's voice remained comparatively unravaged, and so here rather than the ethereal beauty of even a few years ago, we have what sounds like ancient, weary old men, their voices strained and shattered, even though when this was recorded all the band were under thirty-five.

But the significant word here, as Patti Smith correctly noted in her review for Hit Parader [10] , isn't "God" but "please", which she called "the catchword of Love You" but which could equally be called the catchword of Brian Wilson's entire career. This is a pleading album, and I can't really put it better than Smith did:

they are pleading w/ the same urgency as the boy in the back seat to the girl in 1963. please it won't hurt. please. come to me/give to me/tell me/listen to me... [orthography as in the original]

Then after another verse we get the middle eight, and Mike Love's sole songwriting contribution to Love You (apparently he wrote only these lyrics, not those for the rest of the track). And suddenly we're back in the world of Holland, with Love's obsessions with telepathy and levitation coming to the fore again. "Seems we have extra sensory perception...now we can fly". It even sounds different from the rest of the track – the single snare drum thwack has been replaced with a single thump on a tom.

The track builds cleverly, from the single Moog bass under Carl's vocal at the beginning, to a mass of Moog, organ, sax and chanting Beach Men by the end, but throughout it there is a propulsive energy that had been missing from everything the band had recorded, no matter how good, since about 1971.

A staggeringly good opener.

Roller Skating Child

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Mike Love, Al Jardine and Carl Wilson

“And we’ll make sweet lovin’ when the sun goes down/We’ll even do more when her mama’s not around/Well, oh my, oh gosh, oh gee/She really sets chills inside of me”.

This is one of the comparatively weaker tracks on the album, sounding in fact like a rewrite of the previous track (the verse riff is essentially the same but a tone higher), but less inspired, with handclaps and some rudimentary blues guitar attempting to liven it up. Even so, lyrics like the chorus lines quoted above, or “we do it holding hands, it’s so cold I go brr”, are quintessentially Brian Wilson.

This is probably the most “Beach Boys” sounding track on the album, with Mike Love taking the lead in his nasal tenor, but still the greatest moment is the end, when out of nowhere comes a quick G♭-A♭-B♭ rise that’s reminiscent of the chorus to Sail On Sailor, and Brian sings, in his ravaged “low and manly” voice but with the innocence and enthusiasm of a five-year-old, “Roller...skating...CHI-ILD!”

It’s the real entry of the voice that will define much of Love You.

Mona

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

The Beach Boys Love You, like many records where Brian Wilson has had control, is structured in a way that seems strange to modern ears but made sense at the time. When the Beach Boys were first starting out, in the very early 60s, the convention was that albums would have two sides that were different in style. Side one would be "for the kids" and be R&B or rock style tunes, while side two would be "good music" "for the grown-ups" – orchestrated, sweetened ballads. This was the convention to the point where I actually own a Ray Charles record from the early 1960s whose liner notes feel the need to explain that they'd chosen to mix the two styles up rather than do it the conventional way.

And this is how Brian Wilson structured many (though not all) of his albums. It's most obvious on The Beach Boys' Christmas Album, but it's also there on The Beach Boys Today and (to a slightly lesser extent) Summer Days... And Summer Nights! – a side of mostly uptempo rockers, and a side of more sophisticated, more complex, ballads.

So here we get the third uptempo track in a row, and the most fully fleshed-out. This has a full wall-of-sound style production, with massed backing vocals, multiple saxophones, and even drum fills (unusual for Love You). Over a four-chord doo-wop progression, a badly double-tracked Dennis Wilson, his voice so damaged he can barely enunciate, shouts lyrics like "Come on, listen to Da Doo Ron Ron now, listen to Be My Baby, I know you're gonna love Phil Spector" and "Will you, will you will you will you just kiss me/When you leave me won't you just miss me?" (See what Smith meant about "please"?). Melodically, this is

curiously similar to Andrew Gold’s massive hit of the next year, Never Let Her Slip Away.

This is a man in his thirties singing a song about the concerns of a boy in his teens, in the voice of a man in his eighties, and if you can listen to it without a huge grin on your face I pity you.

Johnny Carson

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Carl Wilson

Johnny Carson starts off with a verse that sounds almost like the kind of louche Weimar cabaret song that Scott Walker or someone of that ilk might cover, low piano chords and Moog in a minor key, with no other instrumentation, while the singer sings in a low baritone, being almost mocked by the answering chorus.

Except that that singer is Mike Love, and the words he’s singing are “He sits behind his microphone/ (Joh-nny Car-son!)/ He speaks in such a manly tone/ (Joh-nny! Car-son!)”

This is the make-or-break song for Love You – at this point either you just decide to go with it and accept that, yes, this is going to be a song about how great Johnny Carson is, and how “every night at eleven-thirty he’s so funny”, where the instrumental break consists of four bars of just a stabbed Cm chord,

played on organ and piano, on the on-beat, followed by four more bars alternating between B♭and E♭, and where there is a single cymbal crash that is almost the only use of cymbal in the entire album, or you turn the record off and give up on it.

As the song ends with another doo-wop progression, over which the band chants “Who’s the man that we admire?/Johnny Carson is a real live wire”, only those who are willing to listen with an open mind are left, as the album starts to get really good.

Good Time

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Al Jardine

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson

This song is often considered to not fit on Love You – it was originally recorded during the Sunflower sessions in 1970, apart from one “Hey!” at the end that Brian added in 1977, and features a much fuller arrangement than anything else on the album, including strings and horns, as well as having Brian’s very different 1970 voice in the lead.

It’s also the only song that had had any kind of release before this, having been released as a track by American Spring with the same backing track but slightly revised lyrics (including a vocal part on the instrumental break – “Hey baby, turn up the radio/The DJ just said he’s playing our favourite song/talk to me”). That version is actually in many ways the better mix, having some instrumental parts missing from the Love You mix, and sounding much clearer overall.

Despite all the differences – the orchestration, the simpler structure, Brian's voice – this does still fit on the album, simply because of the eccentric sense of joy in the track. There's no other record in the world where a line like "My girlfriend Penny, she's kinda skinny/And so she keeps her falsies on" would fit.

Honkin' Down The Highway

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

The only single from Love You was this utterly exhilarating country-rocker. One of the fuller productions on the album, this harks back to the band's early days of singing about cars and girls, but with a mixture of sophistication and naivety that is utterly astonishing.

On the one hand, you've got Brian and Dennis bellowing "honk honk, honking down the highway", and the fact that Al is singing about "honking down the gosh-darn highway", but on the other you've got astonishing musical moments like the bridge, where a song that has been in E major throughout the verse diverts into a minor key, but only so the song can build up from Bm7 through Em7 and F#m7 before triumphantly going to G major and then to B major, the fifth of the original key – taking us from a minor version of the chord to a major one through a continuous lift that is just about the most joyous thing ever committed to record, especially when combined with Al singing over the top "I guess I got a way...WITH...GIRLS!" in his magnificent, rich voice.

And this is the thing that makes Brian Wilson so special as a songwriter – the combination of an utterly unmediated emotional expression with a peerless musical intelligence and craft. This is the music that an enthusiastic child would make, making up a song about the first thing that came into her head – if that child was at one and the same time someone with decades of songwriting craft.

No-one else can do this.

Al Jardine re-recorded this song on A Postcard From California, with Brian Wilson adding backing vocals, but this is still the superior version.

Ding Dang

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Roger McGuinn

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

A very silly song indeed, running slightly less than a minute long, all on one chord, with the band singing “Ding, dang, dang, Whoo!, ding and a ding dong” while Mike sings “I love a girl/I love her so madly/I treat her so fine/But she treats me so badly” over and over. This took two people to write.

This is Brian Wilson’s favourite song from Love You.

Solar System

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson

Side two opens with a wonderful waltz-time ballad, layers of synths under Brian's 'low and manly' voice as he sings a song about the planets that seems aimed at children.

Harmonically, this is the most interesting thing so far – the verse/chorus seems to start in G or D, but soon moves to A, before going to F for the chorus, but then ending on a D chord. It's one of the most harmonically mobile things Brian had done in years, and it's absolutely gorgeous. The middle eight, meanwhile, seems to stick mostly to the key of E minor, but with a Cm7 chord that doesn't neatly fit into any of the other keys.

Lyrically, the song is a look at all the planets in the solar system (except Uranus) and the moon, from a childish point of view – "If Mars had life on it/I might find my wife on it", along with mentions of various other astronomical features ("Then there's the Milky Way/That's where the angels play").

It's absolutely lovely, and for all the criticism Brian's gruff 1977 voice gets, I have to say that I find the vocals on this track fit perfectly – he was still a great singer, even if he didn't have a 'beautiful' voice. The harmonies on the chorus, with Brian multi-tracked, straining for the high notes he would once have hit easily, are lovely.

The Night Was So Young

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

By common agreement, this is by far the best song on the album, and for once the consensus isn't wrong. This is the most fully-produced track on Love You – and it sounds like a lot of that production is the work of Carl Wilson, as there are probably more guitars on this one track than on the entire rest of the album, with at least three clearly audible parts (a barely-there rhythm part, a vaguely "Hawaiian" sounding two-note repeated phrase mixed high, and a double-tracked lead part played on the bass strings and mixed low). It also has the most conventional drum part, to the point of actually having a little hi-hat work .

Carl Wilson turns in the best vocal performance of the album, a quite extraordinary effort. Listening to "Why she has to hide/She's passing it by, she won't even try/To make this love go where it should" you could believe this was Brian's old trick of passing vocal lines between different vocalists, but they're all Carl. In fact, it sounds like the only vocals on this track at all are massed Brians in the harmony stack and Carl on lead.

The song itself is a lovely, simple one, with a vaguely Latin or Hawaiian feel thanks to all the major 7ths and 6ths, and with simplistic but effective lyrics that perfectly express the emotion of being awake at night thinking about a love you can't have. Absolutely beautiful.

This is the only Love You song that Brian Wilson has included in his solo sets when performing live, playing it in 2002.

I’ll Bet He’s Nice

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson, Brian Wilson and Carl Wilson

Another absolutely stunning song. The simplest way to describe how good this is is to say there’s a bootleg tape, quite widely available, of Brian demoing several Love You era songs for his bandmates. Their reactions to songs like Mona are...not hugely enthused. But when he plays this one, there are astonished noises and “woo-hoos” in the middle eight, Mike Love starts singing along with the choruses, and Love says at the end “Man, that knocked me out, that was a motherfucker.”

A lovely song built on layers of synths, with the only other instrument audible being a tambourine low in the mix in the left channel, this is an absolutely heartbreaking little song – “I’ll bet he’s twice/As nice as me and it makes me cry/Please don’t tell me if it’s true/Because I’m still in love with you”.

It would be an absolutely perfectly constructed song, in fact, were it not for the middle eight lyrics, which are sung from the point of view of a lover afraid his love will leave, rather than one who has already been left.

This track also features a prominent vocal cameo from former and future Beach Boy Bruce Johnston, who sings the multi-tracked “Well it’s you...” harmonies in the left channel on the fade.

Let’s Put Our Hearts Together

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson and Marilyn Wilson

A simple duet, again built on layer upon layer of synth sounds, this is one of the less complex songs on the second side, rarely venturing far from its home key and staying for much of the song on two chords.

There’s an appealing sweetness to this, and it would take a heart of stone not to be affected at least a little by Brian earnestly singing lines like “maybe I’ll come up with some idea and you’d think that I was clever”, but Marilyn Wilson was never a particularly good singer, and giving her lines where she has to sing a melisma that stretches the single word “good” into six notes over four beats is, frankly, cruel.

I Wanna Pick You Up

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson and Brian Wilson

A rather sweet, charming song sung to one of Brian's children, who were at this point old enough to be going to school – "I love to pick you up, 'cause you're still a baby to me", this is an innocent little song about loving and caring for one's children. There's a subsection of Beach Boys fandom which likes to infer a sexual double-meaning to this song (mostly because of the line "pat her on her butt/she's going to sleep, be quiet"), but while some of the other songs Brian was writing around this time have some disturbing aspects, this is as innocent a song as it gets.

The song is not one of the best on Love You (Darian Sahanaja, later musical director of Brian Wilson's backing band, released a solo version of the song with Pet Sounds style orchestration in the mid-90s, and it doesn't really hold up under the weight), but like the whole album it manages to communicate an honest emotion, in a direct way, and it's an emotion that is very rarely dealt with in rock or pop music. And the harmonies at the end are exquisite, with Love's held bass note about as deep as he's ever sung, while Dennis sings "little baby go to sleep".

A minor piece, but a nice one.

Airplane

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Mike Love, Carl Wilson and Brian Wilson

One of the very best things on Love You, here lyric and music work perfectly together, as the tiny drifts in chord in the verses, from Gmaj7 to G7 to Cmaj7 to Am7 to D7, always keeping several notes in place from one chord to the next, perfectly capture the feeling of floating along above the clouds, thinking about arriving home.

It's a hard song to analyse, because it's just so direct and affecting. Love turns in a remarkably expansive vocal in a somewhat tight space – it's right at the top of his tenor range, where he's normally at his most nasal, but it's a great one. After the two verses, we get a new section – "Airplane, airplane", bringing in a hint of Gm to go with the G major key established in the rest of the song, but only so that on the "carry me back to her side" line we can have the rising Sail On Sailor E♭-F-G sequence. This repeats and then we get Brian singing, almost a descending scale, "down down, on the ground, can't wait to see her face", again evoking perfectly in sound the feeling of a slow descent.

And then there's the tag, where over a two-chord R&B vamp, Brian and Carl engage in a joyous call and response – "I can't wait (can't wait) to see (her face)". This makes up nearly a quarter of the song, and frankly I'd have been just as happy if it had gone on for another five minutes, just hearing the two brothers playing off each other vocally, Carl growling and Brian singing "I can't wa-hay-hait". There's nothing musically clever going on here, just two people singing with such infectious joy that the listener can't help but smile.

Love Is A Woman

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson, Mike Love and Al Jardine

And then finally we get to the song that most people use to dismiss Love You. This is, frankly, a bit of a failure – a doo-wop song with lines like “Love is a woman/so tell her she smells good tonight” and “One two three/She’s fallen in love with me/Four five six/She fell for all my tricks”, this has the same childish eccentricity as most of the rest of the album, but doesn’t have the imagination to go along with it, and to make matters worse there’s just enough sweetening added to the mix (multiple saxophones and what sounds like a flute) to make it sound cluttered, while still sounding amateurish.

You can’t expect every song to be a classic, and this is the only one on Love You that is less than wonderful, but it seems strange that it was sequenced as the last song on the record. The band – or at least Brian – seemed to like it though, and it was kept in their live set for a while, while Brian chose to perform it on a rare solo TV appearance around this time.

I am entirely prepared to accept that I’m missing something with this song, and that in two or three years something will click, and I’ll realise it’s a great work of genius, because the rest of Love You is so unbelievably good that I’m willing to see any failure in it as a failure in me. But for now, I have to say that this is an imperfect ending to an otherwise perfect album.

Pacific Ocean Blue

The Beach Boys Love You marked the end of the Beach Boys as a creative force. Brian Wilson's spurt of creativity continued for a while, producing another album which is (as of August 2013) still unreleased – Adult Child – but the tensions within the group led to the band actually breaking up on September 3, 1977, shortly before the recording of the lacklustre M.I.U. Album. That album featured almost no contributions from Carl or Dennis Wilson, as the band had essentially split into two rival camps – on one side, the younger two Wilson brothers, both going through bad emotional times and turning to drugs and alcohol, but both committed at the same time to trying to move the band's music forward in new ways, while on the other side were the clean-living Mike Love and Al Jardine, who were more interested in meditating and in trying to appeal to the fanbase who had been attracted to the band by the nostalgia of the Endless Summer collection.

While Dennis Wilson contributed almost nothing to the Beach Boys' records from here on, he was productive in his own right; he had a contract as a solo artist from Caribou records (a label run by Jim Guercio, the manager of the band Chicago, who was also the Beach Boys' sometime stage bass player), and for his first release under that contract he produced what is widely considered the best solo album by a member of the Beach Boys, Pacific Ocean Blue.

But while it was an artistic triumph, Pacific Ocean Blue wasn't hugely commercially successful, and the attempted follow-up, Bambu, was never completed. Apart from a brief CD release in 1990, Pacific Ocean Blue remained out-of-print for the most part until 2008, when a 'legacy edition' double CD was released, featuring the full album, many bonus tracks, and much of the Bambu material.

While the bonus tracks vary in quality, this level of attention was no less than the material deserved. It is, frankly, a masterpiece, but one about which it is difficult to write – it's so coherent and unified a vision that there is little to say about one song that can't be said about all.

In writing this essay, I have relied hugely on Craig Slowinski's notes at http://www.beachboysarchives.com/page11 . Normally, when writing these essays, I rely on a variety of sources, but in this case Slowinski's notes, which detail recording dates and session players, and quote interviews with every important player, are all that is needed. Slowinski goes into far more detail than I can, devoting sixty-nine pages in PDF form to these tracks, and frankly my own essay is redundant when compared with his. Were it not that Pacific Ocean Blue is such an essential part of the Beach Boys' story that it can't be left out of my book, I wouldn't have even bothered writing about it.

If you enjoy this essay at all, please go and read Craig's much more detailed work. It deserves a wider audience.

River Song

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Carl Wilson

This song dates back to 1973, and was originally performed live by the Beach Boys with Blondie Chaplin on lead vocals. The track as released features the core of the Beach Boys' touring band from that period – Carl Wilson and Billy Hinsche on guitar, Ed Carter on bass, Dennis on piano and Ricky Fataar on drums. Technically, Dennis' solo contract didn't allow the appearance of other Beach Boys on his album. In fact, Carl Wilson appears on several tracks; most obviously here, where he's very audible in the backing vocal stack.

The song starts with an arpeggiated piano introduction, the first of many piano arpeggios to feature, followed by a sixteen-bar choral verse, over a simple two-chord backing. This is followed by an eight bar bridge, with Dennis singing a solo lead vocal (“ooh, lonely river”), and a repeat of the sixteen-bar verse but with a different melody (“I was born into the city life”).

Then the “rolling, rolling, rolling on river” section, the most interesting part of the song, still based on the same B♭7 − E♭7 change, which doesn’t seem to break down neatly into bars at all, but is on a twenty-one beat cycle. This section is incredibly intense, with the gospel “gotta get away” vocals shrieking away. The song then returns to the arpeggios for “breaks my heart”, then into a riffy ending (“do it do it, got to run away”). Almost all of this is still over the same two chords, and this song, which only contains five chords in total, is an example of how much variation it’s possible to get out of very limited harmonic material.

Lyrically, the song is less impressive, being about how Dennis Wilson wondered why anyone would live in the city when they could go and live in the countryside instead. Possibly because not everyone is a millionaire rock star?

What’s Wrong

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson, Gregg Jakobson and Michael Horn

A fun little shuffle, based for the most part on a two-chord riff , with simple lyrics like “can’t live with you so I think I’ll live without you and play my rock and roll”, this has the closest resemblance to Dennis’ brother Brian’s work of the time, just a simplistic rock and roll song showing the influence of doo-wop

musicians like Dion, as well as referencing All Night Long by Johnny Otis [11] , a song which was also referenced by Talking Heads and Frank Zappa.

This song was apparently inspired by a girlfriend Dennis had at the time who, by his account, was annoyed by him spending his time drinking and playing loud rock music, but who enjoyed spending his money.

Moonshine

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

The piano-and-guitar intro to this pretty ballad again resembles Brian Wilson's work, specifically the introduction to You Still Believe In Me, but it soon becomes quintessentially Dennis Wilson, with odd bars of (6)/(4) thrown in, and an intensity and density that is largely absent from the Beach Boys' work. One of the more minor tracks on the album, but a nice one nonetheless.

Friday Night

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

This song has no connection to the track of the same name recorded during the Smile sessions, being instead an intense slow rock song which, after 1:10 of dense string pads (a musical idea originally used in Dennis' collaboration with Mike Love, 10,000 Years), becomes a heavy, thudding guitar-driven song. This

was apparently Dennis' response to punk, but other than a line about "white punks play tonight", it has nothing to do with punk and is straightforward AOR.

The lyric can really be summed up in the line "I believe my Jesus is in my soul, come on brother let's rock and roll" – for all that he wants to say something profound, Dennis is fundamentally a hedonist.

Dreamer

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

Another slow riffy rocker, this one is mostly driven by a low bass harmonica growl, played by Dennis himself, with the track for the most part being just the bass harmonica, drums playing a slowed-down disco beat, and an electric piano playing chords very low in the mix, apart from the end of each verse, when from nowhere a squall of horns comes in for a couple of bars.

Then at two minutes in ("let the wind"), the whole feel of the track changes, with the instrumentation changing to acoustic piano and tuned percussion (chimes, played by Wilson himself) for forty-four seconds, before going back to the original arrangement, but this time with the horns playing throughout, and an electric guitar soloing through to the end.

Lyrically, meanwhile, this takes the light-hearted Jesus reference from the previous song and turns it around – "I know a carpenter who had a dream/Killed the man, but you couldn't kill the dream", before turning into a song about the necessity of keeping one's dreams, though naturally, Dennis being Dennis, the dreams he sings about tend to be more worldly ones.

Thoughts of You

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Jim Dutch

And side one ends with another song based around an arpeggiated piano part. This starts out as a simple, gentle ballad, with lines like “the thoughts of you fill my heart with joy again”. But the first line, “The sunshine blinded me this morning”, sets the mood for what follows. This is a song about a passion as intense, and as blinding, as the sun’s rays, and so after Wilson sings about his heart filling with joy, we hear an ARP string synthesiser come in and he sings “I’m sorry...forgive me...”, before the instrumentation changes totally, with low bass notes on the piano, ARP and a massed choir of multi-tracked Dennis Wilsons singing backing vocals as he starts the middle section “All things that live one day must die...even love”, ending the section with “look what we’ve done!” howled in despair. The song ends with the woman he’s singing to touching his face, even though the rest of the verse is about loneliness and the inability to forget. Has she returned to him after his apology, or is she dead? The song doesn’t make it clear [12] , so we can presume the former..

Time

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Karen Lamm-Wilson

Side two starts with one of the weaker songs on the album, another slow, piano-based ballad, co-written with the wife who so many of his other songs were about, until at two minutes it turns into a repeated “Hold on, hold on, hold on”, reminiscent of the “rolling, rolling on” sections of River Song. There’s another

subtle Dion reference here, too – when he sings “I’m the kind of guy who loves to mess around”, that’s a call-back to The Wanderer, the Dion song that Dennis used to cover during Beach Boys shows in the mid-60s.

You and I

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson, Karen Lamm-Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

This is a lovely Latin-flavoured track, probably the strongest individual song on Pacific Ocean Blue, and certainly the most immediate, with a fairly conventional structure compared to most of the others. It possibly edges a little close to the Muzak end of the spectrum during the guitar solo, but even there the arpeggios in the rhythm guitar call back to those that open River Song, and again we have references to Jesus opening up the singer’s heart (though the opening line of the song is “I’ve never seen the light that people talk about”). The song is fully integrated into the album, even as it works better than most as a stand-alone track. Unsurprisingly, it was released as a single (in the US – in Europe River Song was chosen instead), but it failed to chart.

Pacific Ocean Blues

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Mike Love

One of the rare collaborations between Dennis Wilson and Mike Love, this was originally intended for 15 Big Ones but perhaps unsurprisingly was dropped from that record, as lyrics like “The flagship of death is an old whaling trawler/The people are rising over whale killing crawlers“ don’t fit so well with

Susie Cincinnati or Palisades Park.

Love's lyrics have received some acclaim, but to be honest while they clearly have their heart in the right place (and are far better than almost anything he wrote from this point on), lines like "Warmed by the blood of the cold hearted slaughter of the otter" just don't quite ring true.

While the song starts out in an interestingly shambolic, loping way, with the odd dropped beat giving an interesting tension to the instrumental introduction, it quickly settles into a fairly pedestrian twelve-bar blues in D (with the very slight twist that instead of the last four bars being V-IV-I-I they go V-V/VII-I-I). After two verses of this there's a sixteen bar section going between G and D ("yeah I love you, Pacific ocean blue") which introduces a reverbed Moog part that sounds watery yet metallic, and is by far the most interesting part of the track's arrangement.

Farewell My Friend

Songwriter: Dennis Wilson

This is possibly the most direct expression of emotion on the album, and the only one to be written entirely by Dennis Wilson. The song was written in the aftermath of the death of Otto "Pops" Hinsche. Hinsche was the father of Billy Hinsche, the Beach Boys' touring keyboard player, and was also Carl Wilson's father-in-law. Dennis and he had been very close, with Hinsche essentially becoming a substitute father for him after Murry Wilson's death, and Hinsche actually died in Dennis' arms.

Fittingly, the only other musicians on this track are Carl Wilson and Billy Hinsche, both of whom provide backing vocals. Everything else, from the ARP strings to the seagull noises to the lap-steel guitar, is played by Dennis Wilson.

The song is simple – having only three chords, and for the majority of it only two – but powerful, and it was later played at Dennis' own funeral.

Rainbows

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson, Carl Wilson and Steve Kalinich

This collaboration with Dennis' friend Steve Kalinich hearkens back to the sound of Holland, perhaps unsurprisingly given Carl Wilson's co-writing credit. While it features the familiar rippling piano arpeggio parts that dominate the album, it has a very different feel to anything else, being dominated by mandolin, banjo and acoustic guitar, with a subtle string arrangement. In fact, the arrangement sounds very like REM's music from a decade later, although Dennis' distinct voice makes sure we know what record we're listening to.

While I've been somewhat critical of Steve Kalinich's lyrics in other essays (and will be more so in later ones), here his sunny-eyed optimism works perfectly with the bright, tinkling, major key music. This is very different from the usual intense, moody music on Pacific Ocean Blue, and all the better for it. Coming between two of the darkest, most downbeat songs, it works well as a palate cleanser, and it's one of the nicest things on the record.

End of the Show

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

The perfect closer to the album, this is a slow piano ballad in Gm, based mostly around major chords with added ninths, giving a strange, melancholy, tense feel to the track. Consisting of two verses, an extended middle section (the “thank you very much” section), and a wordless final verse, this is one of the most “Beach Boys” sounding tracks on Pacific Ocean Blue thanks to Bruce Johnston’s layered background vocal arrangement. The sounds at the end, of an audience cheering and Carl Wilson thanking them, come from a live Beach Boys show.

Dennis wrote this about the approaching end of his relationship with his third wife Karen Lamm, who he divorced five months after recording this. They remarried again eight months after that, but Dennis filed for a second divorce two weeks later.

bonus tracks

Tug of Love

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

A simple song that sounds like it was written about Brian Wilson, this has two simple verses telling someone who is lonely that “the world loves you, yes they do”, an extended soulful middle eight , and a coda, and was included on early line-ups of the album. While many have praised it, to my ears it was rightfully

dropped – it’s pleasant enough, but there’s little real substance here.

Only With You

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Mike Love

A remake of the song Dennis had contributed to Holland, this keeps much of the feel and arrangement of the original, being based around a simple piano, bass and drum track (with a little accordion), but where this improves massively on the original is in the vocal. Where Carl Wilson’s original vocal had sounded sleepy and lazy, here a mass of multi-tracked Dennises plead huskily. Carl Wilson and Dean Torrence assist in the backing vocal stack, but Dennis’ voice dominates, and the result is absolutely stunning.

While it was presumably dropped because a version of the song had already been released, this is much, much better than the original, and better than half the tracks that made it to the finished album. Just gorgeous.

Holy Man

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson (and Taylor Hawkins on vocal version)

A rather plodding piano-based instrumental, with a nice Moog line, this was originally intended to have a vocal recorded, but Gregg Jakobson couldn’t finish

the lyrics in the 1970s. When the album was reissued in 2008, Jakobson completed the lyrics and Taylor Hawkins, the drummer from the Foo Fighters, overdubbed a new lead vocal in a style relatively similar to Dennis'. The CD reissue also includes the untampered original instrumental track, but alas not the rough mix that apparently survives with Carl Wilson singing a guide (lyric-less) vocal.

Apparently another version was recorded in 2008, with Brian May and Roger Taylor of Queen adding overdubs along with Hawkins, but that version has, perhaps wisely, been kept in the vaults.

Mexico

Songwriter: Dennis Wilson

This was intended as part of a "Mexico trilogy" along with San Miguel (a Beach Boys track from the Sunflower era that had at that point not yet been released) and Time For Bed (which appears on disc two of this release).

This is about thirty seconds of very nice music, with some very nice Morricone-esque horn playing from John Foss (on flugelhorn, French horn and trumpet). Unfortunately the track lasts for five and a half minutes, and no new musical ideas come in during that time, until the jokey barrelhouse piano right before the end. At a much shorter length this could have been very nice, but it becomes incredibly tedious.

Disc Two: Bambu (The Caribou Sessions)

Even before Pacific Ocean Blue was released, Dennis had started work on a second album, to be called Bambu, for which his principal collaborator was Beach Boys touring keyboard player Carli Muñoz. Unfortunately, a combination of factors conspired to keep Bambu from being finished – Dennis' relationship with Karen Lamm was collapsing, Brother Studios (which he had co-owned with Carl) had to be sold, leaving Dennis with nowhere to go if the creative urge suddenly struck him, and two of the best tracks, Baby Blue and Love Surrounds Me, were taken and used for the Beach Boys album L.A. (Light Album).

As a result, nothing from these sessions was released for thirty years, save for the two songs on LA and one track (All Alone) included on the Beach Boys rarities compilation Endless Harmony in 1999, but something like a finished Bambu was compiled for the second disc of 2008's Pacific Ocean Blue re-release.

It's a mixed bag. It's clearly better than any post-Love You Beach Boys album, but it's also clearly the work of someone losing focus. Muñoz' work is inferior to Wilson's own songs, and the whole thing has a sloppy air. It's possible that had Wilson's personal life been more stable, he could have pulled this together into a very good album, but as it is it's just one in the endless series of missed opportunities in the Beach Boys' career.

Under The Moonlight

Songwriter: Carli Muñoz

The first song is this workmanlike blues-rock sludge, based around a Jimmy

Reed-style shuffle, but beefed up into mid-70s heaviness. The lyrics are similarly uninspiring, just being a list of things that are great about being a rock star. The only real point of interest in the track is Dennis' vocal – while his voice had deteriorated considerably by this point, and he was having difficulty even enunciating syllables, he sings with an energy that pushes the track just past mediocrity.

It's Not Too Late

Songwriter: Carli Muñoz

The most fully-produced of the Bambu tracks, this is also the song of Muñoz' that fits best with Dennis Wilson's style, so much so that it's hard to believe he didn't write it. A slow ballad based around electric piano, but with a full (though rudimentary) orchestral arrangement (which frankly sounds exactly like the kind of thing that Dennis did on Pacific Ocean Blue with ARP string synthesisers, but is apparently a sixteen-piece string section), this is one of the nicest things on the album.

It's also a duet with Carl Wilson, who sings the choruses and tags (apparently doubled at points by Karen Lamm). Carl was going through similar personal problems at the time, and this is one of several vocals around this time where he sounds mildly intoxicated (though I have no knowledge of whether he was or not). Carl's vocals became steadily more mannered as the next couple of decades went on, and this is an early example of his mature (and to my mind much less interesting) performances – someone coasting on a great voice, rather than putting in a great performance.

The track is possibly too dense for its own good – when the Double Rock Baptist

Church Choir are on a track but almost inaudible because of all the other stuff going on, that's possibly a sign that the kitchen sink needs removing – but as one of the last examples of Dennis' intense, dense productions in the style he'd used going back to Carl And The Passions, it's definitely worth listening to.

It's also a track that has been improved by being left unreleased. The bootlegs of this material that circulated for decades had a mix of this with a horrible over-reverbed snare sound to the forefront. Thankfully, taste has prevailed in the mix used on this CD.

School Girl

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

The first Dennis Wilson original on the CD is, frankly, a mess in every way. The lyrics, about wanting sex with a schoolgirl, are...charitably, let's use the phrase 'of their time'... while Wilson's vocal is bellowed and almost incomprehensible. There's also a weird effect on the vocal, which may be deliberate, or may be an artefact of the extraction process (the lead vocal was missing from the multi-tracks and had to be digitally extracted from a rough mix). Oddly, much of the vocal take that appears on the bootlegged versions of the track is missing, leading to the instrumental tag sounding curiously empty.

The track isn't without points of interest – the fast, bubbly Moog bass, for example, is very nice – but it should have stayed unreleased. To make matters worse, the track was of course originally planned to be on the same album as Baby Blue, with which it shares the lyric "late at night when the whole world's sleeping, I think about you". Without that connection, what little power the track had dissipates.

Love Remember Me

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson, Steve Kalinich and Gregg Jakobson

One of the better songs on Bambu, this is very much a track of two halves. The first one minute and forty-three seconds is a very simple ballad, starting with a verse (unfortunately never repeated, as it's by far the most interesting musical material on the album) which sounds for all the world like the work of Harry Nilsson, albeit with the usual Wagnerian excessive Dennis Wilson production, and followed by a rather repetitive section with lyrics about how "people live, people die, people laugh, people cry" (typical Kalinich lyrics).

Then for the last two minutes and twenty-three seconds it becomes a huge gospel epic, with Dennis bellowing over the Double Rock choir singing "Love comes gently down on you/Love comes tumbling down on you", while squealing rock guitar competes with flugelhorns and French horns.

The only thing that spoils the track is Dennis' lead vocal, which shows just how far, and how quickly, he had deteriorated. He sounds, frankly, like someone with alcohol-induced brain damage, unable to form basic phonemes.

Love Surrounds Me

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Geoffrey Cushing-Murray

This is largely the same track as used on L.A. (Light Album), minus a few overdubs, and will be discussed there, since that is the version that was finished and released in Dennis' lifetime.

Wild Situation

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

This is a Beach Boys track by any other name, featuring Carl Wilson and Bruce Johnston prominently in the harmony stack, and with Carl contributing much of the guitar on the track.

One of the simpler tracks on the disc, this just celebrates the first sexual encounter with a new girlfriend, and has one of the clearer lead vocals on the Bambu sessions. While it's nothing special, Dennis' bass harmonica bassline gives the track a real energy that's missing from several of the other tracks.

Perhaps wisely, the last line that is included on bootlegged versions of this song – "she got it hard and now it's a big erection" – was removed, apparently by Dennis himself.

Common

Songwriter: Dennis Wilson

This is an instrumental which seems to have been Dennis trying a few different musical ideas which he'd been working on in other forms. It's in three sections, and the first section is similar (but not identical) to the feel of Love Surrounds Me, with a similar drum part and squelchy Moog bass. The second, longer, part is the arpeggiated section of Morning Christmas, a song Dennis had been working on for an aborted Beach Boys Christmas album (see the entries for M.I.U. Album and Ultimate Christmas for more on this), extended to inordinate length, and then in the last thirty seconds there's a brief, faint, church organ fragment.

Clearly unfinished, and clearly never intended to be finished, this is still one of the better things on Bambu.

Are You Real

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

A rather half-thought-out ballad, this plods along pleasantly enough, but is very Dennis-Wilson-by-numbers. Again, this seems made up of recycled ideas, this time including musical material from 10,000 Years, a still-unreleased collaboration with Mike Love, but the last two minutes is frankly uninspired, fast Moog arpeggios over a dull stadium rock backing, sounding for all the world like an Argent outtake.

He's a Bum

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

Another song which seems to show the influence of Harry Nilsson, this is yet another song which consists of about a minute of actual song followed by an over-long extended coda with little musical connection to the first part, with Dennis singing “it’s all right, it’s all right, it’s all right”.

While on Pacific Ocean Blue itself, Dennis’ idiosyncratic structures work, here they seem more the product of someone unable to focus long enough to provide any structure at all. In this case, though, the track itself is short enough not to outstay its welcome, and the ‘actual song’ part is a rather charming portrait of its composer as “a dog without a bone” about whom “people say he lost his way” but “that’s all right, it’s all right”, over a semi-calypso rhythm on piano and ukulele. The backing vocals (mixed very low) are by a group of rock journalists covering the session, who Dennis Wilson unsuccessfully attempted to get to rewrite the lyrics to the song.

Cocktails

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson, John Hanlon and Gregg Jakobson

A pleasant slow ballad, this seems to have evolved in the studio – John Hanlon, credited as a co-writer, was the principal engineer for the Bambu sessions, and provides the acoustic guitar here, the only instrument on the track not played by Dennis Wilson himself.

It’s pleasant enough, though clearly unfinished, but at this point Bambu, unlike Pacific Ocean Blue, has become wearying. The tracks consist of nice ideas, played with for a while and then dropped, rather than being developed into coherent songs, and they’re for the most part very similar in tempo, feel and instrumentation. Any one or two of them would have greatly enhanced any Beach Boys record around this time, but these constant, heavy, emotive ballads have the same effect as trying to eat Christmas dinner every meal for a week would – after a while, you just want a cheese sandwich.

I Love You

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

Another track that’s made up of two very different halves, this is one of the most effective things on Bambu. A short, plodding, single verse, about Dennis’ new relationship with Christine McVie of Fleetwood Mac (destined to be, like most of his relationships, passionate, intense, and short-lived), gives way to a quite lovely coda featuring just piano arpeggios and the Double Rock Baptist Choir, singing wordlessly, and recorded both forwards and backwards. It sounds almost like Brian Eno, with the backwards and forwards vocals intertwining with each other, coated in reverb, and is quite, quite lovely. This is also one of the shortest tracks on the CD, coming in at only two minutes and two seconds.

Constant Companion

Songwriters: Carli Muñoz and Rags Baker

This song is a huge relief after the ponderous ballads that make up much of Bambu. While I'm not a huge fan of Muñoz' songwriting, this Latin track, driven by a funky wah-wahed clavinet and a full horn section, brings a tremendous release of tension, and is also by far the most coherent piece of songwriting we've heard in half an hour or so.

Time for Bed

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Gregg Jakobson

This track, intended for the "Mexico trilogy", was for many years bootlegged as an instrumental under the name "New Orleans". And in truth that name fits – this sounds like nothing so much as Randy Newman's more R&B-influenced work, like You Can Leave Your Hat On or Have You Seen My Baby instrumentally at least, although the squalling horn section is quintessentially Dennis Wilson.

The lyrics are, one hopes, an attempt at a Newman-esque unreliable narrator, as otherwise lines like "I think I'd love to steal a car and cruise around/Run over one fat, ugly, just for kicks" leave a very, very nasty taste in the mouth.

Album Tag Song

Songwriter: Dennis Wilson

This is a piece that was actually put together by engineer John Hanlon in 2008, from two separate Dennis compositions. The beginning and end are from one piece, a (7)/(8) funky piece with a wordless falsetto vocal, while the middle section, a slow (4)/(4) piano ballad typical of much of the rest of the album, is a portion of a demo from a completely different session.

This works astonishingly well, and manages to create a far more coherent, interesting composition than either piece would have made separately, although the coda is still a little extended for my tastes. One has to wish that someone like Hanlon had imposed a similar structure on the aimless pieces that make up a lot of this CD.

All Alone

Songwriter: Carli Muñoz

This big ballad by Muñoz was regarded by many as a highlight of the Endless Harmony rarities collection, when it was first released in 1999. In truth, much of the song's power comes from hearing the line "If I could live my life again" sung by someone whose life was so famously cut short. On its own merits, this is a soft-rock ballad that comes dangerously close to Muzak, particularly once the lounge sax solo starts.

As with all Muñoz' work on Bambu, this is a much more coherently thought-out, structured song than most of Dennis' work, but lacks the spark and originality that is evident even in Wilson's lesser pieces.

Piano Variations on “Thoughts of You”

Songwriter: Dennis Wilson

This is what its title would suggest – a solo, instrumental, piano performance of a radically reworked version of Thoughts Of You. This has some wonderful new melodic ideas, and is almost unrecognisable as the same piece. It makes a beautiful ending to a patchy, infuriating, but interesting collection.

(Note that on the CD this is followed by a bonus track, the vocal version of Holy Man discussed above.)

Going Public

There were two Beach Boys solo albums released in 1977. The first of these, Dennis Wilson's Pacific Ocean Blue, is generally considered a masterpiece.

Going Public, on the other hand, and with all possible respect to Bruce Johnston, simply isn't.

Johnston will be re-entering the story proper in 1979, though since leaving the band in 1972 he'd remained on friendly terms with them and added backing vocals to several tracks. But he'd not been sitting around waiting for the call from his old band-mates. Johnston was always the best musician in the band, in the purely technical sense – he's an excellent pianist, and able to turn his hand to any kind of music. So between 1972 and 1977 he'd done all sorts of work, from working with Curt Boettcher (by now shortening his name to Becher), Gary Usher and Terry Melcher on their odd disco-calypso-surf-pop California Music project, to singing backing vocals with Carl Wilson on Elton John's Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me, to co-writing a top 30 hit for the Hudson Brothers, to writing a song for The Captain And Tennille.

That song, I Write The Songs, was re-recorded by David Cassidy on an album Johnston produced for him in 1975, and then covered again by Barry Manilow, in a version which became a massive worldwide hit, and won Johnston the Grammy award for Song Of The Year (still the only time a Beach Boys member has won this award).

As a result of this success, Johnston recorded this solo record, produced by Gary

Usher (supposedly, though I've seen claims that Usher had little involvement) and with Curt Becher co-arranging. The intention was apparently more to showcase other songs of Johnston's that might have hit potential, rather than to be a satisfying collection in itself, and the result is, frankly, awful – a mixture of stripped-down demos that sound like every bad lounge singer in existence, and some of the least danceable disco in existence. Johnston himself, never one to hide his opinion, has repeatedly disowned the album, saying he doesn't understand why anyone would want to listen to it.

I have to make a confession here – this is one of only two records I'm writing about which I don't feel fully familiar with. Both this, and Mike Love's solo album Looking Back With Love, are so poor that I've listened to them precisely twice each before the start of this project – once to see if they were as bad as people say, and once to check that they were really that bad. Those two albums are being included for completeness' sake, not because I can offer any great insights.

Unless noted, all songs are written by Bruce Johnston, who's also the lead vocalist.

I Write The Songs

You almost certainly know this song in Barry Manilow's hit version, but in case you have managed to avoid it, this is a song about music, part of a regrettable 70s sub-genre that also included Music by John Miles. In this case Johnston sings that "I write the songs that make the whole world sing/I write the songs of joy and special things". When Manilow sang this, people thought, naturally enough, that it was a rather egotistical song, with Manilow claiming "I am music and I write the songs".

Johnston has since clarified that the song is meant to be from the voice of God, from whom all music comes in his opinion. And writing a song that claims to speak for God is apparently less egotistical than merely claiming to have written all music in human history. O hubris, thy name is Johnston.

In truth, the song is nowhere near as bad as its whipping-boy status would suggest, having a decent, if saccharine, melody, and some relatively interesting chord changes, at least until the horrible truck-driver's key changes start to come in after the middle eight. That's not to say it's good, mind, just that it's not as bad as its reputation. Johnston performs it in a fairly restrained way, with the recording being just him and a piano (plus a ton of reverb) for the most part, although the addition of a choir for the last few notes is a bit much, and of course his voice is as good as ever.

This song was part of the Beach Boys' live repertoire for a couple of years after Johnston rejoined the band, but has now become part of a 'comedy' bit of the show, where Johnston plays a couple of bars and is then made to apologise for having written it.

And while it shouldn't need saying, for completeness' sake I'll say it. This song isn't about Brian Wilson.

Deirdre

Writers: Bruce Johnston and Brian Wilson

The first truly inexplicable move on Going Public is this rerecording of the Sunflower song, with slightly-rewritten lyrics. The original had been, if not

great, then perfectly inoffensive and with a mild light charm. Here the light swing of the original is replaced with an utterly generic disco-lite sub-Bee Gees backing – thudding four-on-the-floor drums with quavers on the hi-hat, backing vocals appearing and disappearing at random places in the stereo spectrum, an unimaginative horn arrangement and so forth.

The lyrical rewrite is clumsy, the disco arrangement galumphs clumsily when it should be encouraging us to dance, and then just in case anyone was starting to get some accidental pleasure from the song, it breaks down into a slow tempo for a few bars for a lounge sax solo. Utterly joyless.

Thank You Baby

This is a remake of a song Johnston originally recorded in the 1960s, with Terry Melcher, as their duo Bruce & Terry. In that form it was a fairly passable piece of Jan And Dean-esque harmony pop, sounding vaguely influenced by late period Buddy Holly, but with some baroque pop harpsichord. (Bruce and Terry also recorded covers of two Holly songs around the same time).

Here it’s slowed down and performed by Johnston over solo electric piano, and while it’s a pretty melody, the song itself doesn’t stand up to this treatment, with all its jolly internal rhyming – “And the way/every day/when you’d say/I love to see you smile” or “thoughts/can’t be bought/but they ought/to be shared with someone close”. That sort of thing works fine in an uptempo pop song, but just sounds ridiculous in a sensitive singer-songwriter ballad.

The middle section, where Johnston does multi-tracked “Mister Sandman” barbershop vocals works quite well though.

(For those who might think that because I dislike Going Public I’m dismissing Johnston as a writer or performer, incidentally, I cannot recommend the Sundazed Best Of Bruce & Terry highly enough. Twenty tracks of perfect pop, including the utterly magnificent Girl It’s Alright Now, and the Love/Johnston collaboration Don’t Run Away. One poor album shouldn’t distract from the man’s talent.)

Rendezvous

Writers: Bruce Johnston, Bill Hudson, Brett Hudson, Mark Hudson

This track was written with and for the Hudson brothers, a pop band who were the stars of the children’s TV show The Hudson Brothers Razzle Dazzle Show. Their version, done in a vaguely imitation-Chinnichap style, made number 26 as a single in 1975, becoming their second-biggest hit.

Johnston’s version sounds closer to Neil Sedaka, with its ridiculous but catchy “Rendezvous/Rendezvous/Ronday-ronday-ronday rendezvous” chorus. It’s silly pop fluff, but enjoyable for what it is.

(It’s still impossible, though, to get over Johnston singing the first line “Your mom and dad/Think I’m bad”. No, they think you’re a multi-millionaire who puts a photo of himself in full morning suit and top hat sat on the bumper of a Rolls-Royce on his album cover.)

Won’t Somebody Dance With Me?

Writer: Lynsey De Paul

One of two cover versions here, this is a remake of a sickeningly sweet Lynsey De Paul hit, that actually manages to be even more saccharine than the original. While De Paul's original was all sung from the perspective of the "wallflower" who wants someone to dance with her, here Johnston switches the lyrics round to be from the point of view of her father, watching her, before saying "and she says", at which point a female vocalist (I don't know who, as it's not noted as a duet in the liner notes, but the credited female backing vocalists are Cindy Bullens and Diana Lee, and Toni Tennille is given "special thanks" in the credits) sings the "won't somebody dance with me?" chorus, in a ludicrously high voice which can't quite reach the notes.

The low point – not just of the album, but perhaps of all musical history up to this point – comes in the second chorus, when after each line Johnston gives a spoken response. "Won't somebody dance with me? (Be patient, sweetheart)/Start up a romance with me/(There'll be time for that)"

If anyone ever tries to tell you punk was unnecessary, play them this track.

Disney Girls

There's little to say about this that I didn't say in the write-up in the Surf's Up chapter. It's an inferior performance to that one, and just on the other side of the line that separates pop perfection from schmaltz, and this performance – solo vocal and piano apart from the "church bingo chances" line (and an electric piano coming in on the coda), and taken a little slower than the original – shows how much the other Beach Boys added to that track. It's utterly unnecessary if you've heard the original, but it's still the best thing on Going Public by a long, long way.

Rock And Roll Survivor

A pleasant enough country-pop song, of a kind that Glenn Campbell might have recorded, about how the singer is through with his rock and roll days and all grown up, and is going to sing music , like country music, which is more appropriate for someone who's in his mid-thirties and incredibly rich.

The bragging about his wealth in the first verse is a little off-putting, but in a way this seems like the most emotionally honest song on the entire album, and it's admirable in a way – he's bored of rock and roll music, he wants to grow and play something "pleasing to my ear". Given the way rock music has self-mythologised almost from its inception, and it's quite nice to hear someone say "no, actually, there's more to life, and to music, than this."

After the nadir of Won't Somebody Dance With Me we're actually into a little stretch where the album is managing to achieve mediocrity, which is definitely an improvement.

Don't Be Scared

This is actually the second song Johnston wrote titled Don't Be Scared. The earlier one, by Bruce & Terry but released under the name The Rip Chords, is a wonderful piece of hot-rod pop with Chuck Berry guitar licks and pretty much every Beach Boys or Jan & Dean hook ever, all stuffed into two minutes and forty seconds along with a strange Joe Meek style guitar line.

This isn’t. This is Bruce, with two electric pianos and a string section, singing about how he’s a nice guy and while you only think of him as a friend he’s much better than that boyfriend you have now who’s upset you, and you shouldn’t be scared.

And the thing is...it’s not that terrible, and that’s what makes it that terrible. This is perfectly competently done, by someone who understands music very, very well. But we’re onto the penultimate track now, and the closest we’ve got to a human emotion is ‘sensitivity’. I’m not one who thinks that music should ‘rock’ necessarily – I’ve often advocated, only half-jokingly, that the electric guitar and drum kit should be banned for a decade to force people to either do something new and different or not make music at all – but...

But great music, good music, anything that deserves the name “music” at all, of any type, has a life and an energy to it, has some guts. Whether it’s Bach or Benny Goodman or Hank Williams or Ray Charles or Billie Holiday or Peggy Lee or Stravinsky or Charles Ives or Kate Bush or Elvis Presley or Captain Beefheart. Even music that a lot of people would dismiss as muzak, like the Swingle Singers. Hell, even the old Rediffusion station ID... you listen to those, and you get some sense of life, of humanity, of someone attempting to communicate something, to bridge a gap between the artist and another human being.

Even advertising jingles. “A finger of fudge is just enough to give your kids a treat” was, after all, trying to communicate something to other people, so there’s some life to it.

This, though...this is absolutely competent, put together according to every rule you could come up with on how to write a mid-70s sensitive ballad, but... nothing. There’s nothing there. It’s an empty shell, as the entire album is.

I can define a category wide enough to include the Cadbury's Fudge jingle, Edgard Varese, James Last, Tuvan throat singers, Lee "Scratch" Perry, Public Enemy, The Beatles and Tiny Tim, and find elements all those things have in common to justify their inclusion. But I can't with any honesty put this track, or this album, into that group.

This isn't music.

Pipeline

Writers: Brian Carman, Bob Spickard

This is a disco remake of the old surf instrumental, originally by the Chantays, with the melody being alternately played by strings, horns, and sung by Johnston and Becher in wordless vocals.

It's not so terrible, I suppose, once you get over the cognitive dissonance, but by this point I've lost the will to live.

This was released as a single and somehow managed to make the top forty in the UK. I hear people did a lot of cocaine in the 1970s.

Please don't make me listen to Going Public again, I'll be good, I promise.

M.I.U. Album

In September 1977, the Beach Boys briefly split up. There were many reasons, but the fundamental split in the band came down to Al Jardine and Mike Love wanting to live cleanly, coast on past glories, and practice transcendental meditation, while Carl and Dennis Wilson wanted to make artistically progressive music while abusing as many substances as possible (Carl later cleaned himself up).

The split was only temporary, but it's obvious which side won control of the band from the title of this album – M.I.U. is short for Maharishi International University, where the bulk of the album was recorded.

In fact, this was originally two albums. After the band had decided not to put out Brian's Adult/Child follow-up to Love You, Love, Jardine, Brian Wilson and the backing band decamped to Iowa, to the titular university, to record two albums simultaneously, one to be called California Feeling, the other Merry Christmas From The Beach Boys. Given that they'd just signed to CBS Records, while still owing an album to Reprise, it seems plausible that they were trying to record a contractual obligation album while also recording the first offering for their new contract.

In fact, a third LP was being recorded along with these two – Mike Love's side band Celebration, featuring many of the touring band members, was recording Almost Summer, the soundtrack album to the film of the same name, including a title track, co-written by Love, Jardine and Wilson, which made the top thirty in the US when released as a single.

Unfortunately, they spread themselves too thin. Some of the Christmas tracks had minimal lyrical rewrites, to take out the Christmas references, and a compilation of tracks from both California Feeling and Merry Christmas, plus a couple of out-takes from the New Album and Adult/Child projects, became this record [13] .

The result, which was released in October 1978, is, frankly, horrible. It features no active involvement from Dennis Wilson (who said of M.I.U. “I hope that the karma will fuck up Mike Love’s meditation forever. That album is an embarrassment to my life. It should self destruct ”) beyond the archive tracks, and Carl Wilson only contributes one lead vocal (Dennis didn’t turn up to Iowa at all, and Carl only attended briefly). Brian Wilson was there in body, but not in spirit, leaving production duties to Al Jardine (who looked after the vocals) and backing band keyboardist Ron Altbach (previously of one-hit wonders King Harvest, Altbach looked after the backing tracks).

Beach Boys records had misfired before, but never because of a lack of artistic ambition. Unfortunately, M.I.U. Album was to set the pattern for much of the next few decades.

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love

She’s Got Rhythm

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Mike Love and Ron Altbach

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

At least the first track doesn't give you any false hope. It starts with Brian Wilson screeching, as if in agony, "Laaaaast night I went out disco dancing..."

This really does set the tone for the whole album. There's an attempt to recreate past glories that falls laughably short – this tuneless screech is apparently someone's idea of a Brian Wilson falsetto – combined with an equally laughable attempt to be up-to-date and trendy.

The song itself is a basic shuffle, based on an instrumental composed by Altbach for the Almost Summer soundtrack, with lyrics provided by Love and Wilson. It consists of a strict alternation between a sixteen-bar, three-chord, major key verse/chorus 'sung' by Wilson, and an eight-bar minor-key bridge sung nasally by Love.

This is one of the few songs to which Carl Wilson contributed during his two-day stay in Iowa, and he seems to be just barely audible in the backing vocal stack.

It boggles my mind that something this piss-poor could have been released by a major band, on a major record label.

Come Go With Me

Songwriter: Clarence Quick

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

This is much better. The Beach Boys had tried this during the New Album sessions, but this appears to have been a completely new recording from 1978. It's a cover version of a hit by the doo-wop group The Del-Vikings, a song that is probably otherwise best known as the song John Lennon was playing the first time Paul McCartney saw him.

The track seems to feature only Jardine on vocals, but at this point Jardine was probably the most proficient vocalist in the band, and he manages to make a better job of doing Beach Boys style harmonies by himself than the band were doing at this point. The production is ersatz-Spector, and the whole thing is pleasantly enjoyable. While it's not earth-shattering, it's cheerful and listenable.

This was released as a single three years later, on the back of a compilation of the band's 70s work, and made number 18 in the US charts in January 1982. It has remained in the set of the various touring iterations of the Beach Boys to this day.

Hey Little Tomboy

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Mike Love, Brian Wilson and Carl Wilson

Oh dear. The unreleased New Album and Adult/Child included some of Brian Wilson's best songwriting, including wonders like Sherry She Needs Me and Still I Dream Of It. They also included this...

A song where five hoarse-voiced bearded men in their mid-thirties ask a "little tomboy" to "sit here on my lap" and tell her "I'm gonna teach you to kiss" and "it's time you turned into a girl".

It's easy enough to see why Brian Wilson wrote this – most of his material around this time was from a youthful perspective, and he wasn't especially mentally well at the time. It's even possible, just about, to see why the band would record it, to encourage Brian in his work. What it's not possible to understand is why, when they had at a conservative estimate at least three albums' worth of material in the can from which to pick for MIU, even not counting Dennis' solo work, they would choose to put this on the record, especially since it's not even musically interesting.

We can thank heaven for small mercies, though – the reason the instrumental section sounds so bare is because there was originally a spoken section, with the band members leering "Now shave your legs for the first time", "let's put on a little lipstick and see what it looks like", while making oinking noises like pigs...

Kona Coast

Songwriters: Al Jardine and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love, Al Jardine and Brian Wilson

And after that, a return to solid mediocrity is a welcome relief. This track was originally recorded for the Christmas sessions as Kona Christmas or Melekalikimaka, and had a lyric about how “I wanna spend Christmas where I dig it the most, in Hawaii”. One quick rewrite later and it became “I wanna go surfin’ where I dig it the most, in Hawaii”, making this the first Beach Boys track to mention surfing in a decade.

Add in an out-of-tune falsetto screech from Brian Wilson, failing to replicate the vocal line from Hawaii, and some mild ethnic stereotyping (“I’ll learn to talk-a like a local, I betcha”) and you have a crass, boorish track that is nonetheless better than half of what came before, thanks largely to a single mildly interesting chord change (the iim7-III7 change that also heralds Al Jardine’s vocal part, which is much stronger than Love or Wilson’s).

Peggy Sue

Songwriters: Buddy Holly, Jerry Allison and Norman Petty

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

This track was originally recorded for the 15 Big Ones sessions, before being resurrected in the Iowa sessions, initially as a Christmas song with new lyrics (“Christmas time is here again”), before Al polished it up for M.I.U. Album.

The result is a mess. While it does at least feature actual Beach Boys harmonies, it's a clodhopping, joyless, stifling wall of sound, taken too slow and without any of the joy and inventiveness of Buddy Holly's classic original. Al Jardine turns in a typically excellent lead vocal, but when this was released as a single it got no higher in the US charts than number 59, which is about right.

Wontcha Come Out Tonight

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Brian Wilson

It comes to something when a track like this is an improvement. There's no actual song here, in any real sense – the song alternates between a trite chorus and a not-much-less-trite verse, with lyrics so forgettable you forget them while actually listening, while the chord sequence is a hackneyed doo-wop progression in the choruses and a ii-I progression in the verses, two of the biggest clichés in rock and roll.

But the intro and outro vocal parts show some real inventiveness – a multi-tracked Brian singing in a variety of different voices, with more enthusiasm than he does anywhere else on MIU, while Mike Love puts in an excellent bass vocal.

And Brian's vocals on the choruses (which sound like they might be the same vocal take pasted in multiple places) are just gorgeous. He's singing in his 'low and manly' voice, but gently, rather than in the gruff bellow of the last two albums. The singing style he uses here, on Match Point Of Our Love, and on Winter Symphony from the Christmas sessions, is one he never used before or

since, but it makes one wish there were many more recordings of him singing like this.

Unfortunately, it’s spoiled by Love’s over-nasal verse vocals, and the song itself is a nothing, but as the closer to side one it at least ends the side on a moderately positive note.

Sweet Sunday Kinda Love

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

Side two opens with one of the two songs on M.I.U. that comes closest to being actually good. It’s not a masterpiece, but it’s a solid song, and a return to Brian’s old obsession Be My Baby, with which it shares a rhythmic feel and the chord sequence of the first eight bars of the verse.

There’s not much in the way of major harmonic innovation in the song, but it feels thought about in a way that much of the rest of the album doesn’t – the change to v for the middle eight, and then having the descending bassline drag the chord from the minor fifth to the major fifth by descending by semitones, isn’t harmonically outrageous, but it is interesting.

Carl Wilson doesn’t turn in one of his best leads – he sounds a little bored with the material – but he sings on-key and in his beautiful voice, and on a record

dominated by nasal sneering from Love and off-key shrieking from Brian Wilson, that’s a huge improvement.

Belles Of Paris

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Ron Altbach and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

And then they go and spoil it, again showing the lack of thought that went into this album. Quite simply, if you have two songs that rip off Be My Baby, you don’t sequence them back to back!

This, too, is based around the I-ii-V7 progression that powers Be My Baby (very slightly modified – here it goes I-Imaj7-ii7-V7, and the changes don’t come in precisely the same places, but the resemblance is clearly there), and has the same rhythm to it.

Love actually does a very good job of the vocal here, singing in his lower, more mellow register, but the song is a less inventive version of the previous track, the harmonies are off, and the lyrics (describing a trip round Paris “watching belles jeunes filles and the handsome gendarmes”) are pap.

This was originally recorded during the Christmas sessions as Bells Of Christmas, and oddly, when that was released, Brian Wilson wasn’t credited as a writer and Alan Jardine was, suggesting Wilson’s contribution was purely

lyrical. Even more oddly, Wilson released a near-identical track, On Christmas Day, in 2000 [14] , and he was credited as sole composer.

Pitter Patter

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Al Jardine and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Al Jardine

This is one of the more listenable tracks on the album, a mid-tempo rocker dominated by Jardine’s very strong vocals, with a decent performance from Love, with his nasality working to the song’s advantage.

There’s absolutely nothing of interest to say about it, but it’s not bad either. Had the whole of M.I.U. been like this, it would have been mildly disappointing rather than an utter travesty.

My Diane

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

And suddenly, I’m in tears. Even though I’ve listened to this track more than all the others on the record put together, it still has the power to move me to tears.

This song is a leftover from the 1976 New Album sessions, and the difference between this and even the best of the rest of M.I.U. is... to say it’s night and day would not only be too clichéd, but wouldn’t go far enough. It’s the difference between a work of art and a cola commercial.

The song itself is simple enough, alternating between a minor-key verse that progresses through related chords, and a chorus that’s just the I, IV and V of the relative major, along with a very brief bridge, but it’s a song written entirely from the heart.

Brian Wilson wrote this about his wife’s sister, with whom he’d had an on-and-off affair for a long time, and it’s a cry of loss like that of a child, who doesn’t understand what loss even means – “Now that I have lost my Diane, there’s no plan as to where to go/It was hard to lose my Diane, now I just miss her so”. It’s simple – simplistic, even – but because it’s an absolutely direct emotional expression.

Dennis Wilson rises to the occasion, bellowing the lyrics like a wounded animal, and the result is one of the most emotionally devastating things the Beach Boys ever did. Powerful enough out of context, when it blind-sides you in the middle of the pabulum that surrounds it, it’s almost too much to bear.

Match Point Of Our Love

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson

And then we have Brian Wilson singing over the kind of disco-lite background that the Captain And Tennille might have thought was a little too uninspired for them, and the lyrics he's singing are an extended metaphor treating the end of a love affair as a tennis match. ("So we volleyed a while with small talk and a smile and as push comes to shove/I'd say this must be the match point of our love"). If that's the sort of thing you like, then you'll certainly like this track. Well, possibly.

Brian's vocals are excellent, but there's nothing here to suggest this is the same band who even recorded 15 Big Ones, let alone any of the Beach Boys' good albums.

Winds Of Change

Songwriters: Ron Altbach and Ed Tuleja

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine and Mike Love

And this is...not terrible, compared to the rest of MIU. The Beach Boys very rarely turned to outside songwriters for new songs (as opposed to collaborating with outsiders, or performing cover versions). On their self-titled 1985 album they recorded songs by Stevie Wonder and Culture Club (who were then one of the biggest bands in the world). Here...two ex-members of King Harvest who were in their backing band.

The song itself is perfectly adequate if you like wistful 70s piano ballads with ‘spiritual’ lyrics like “Worlds in motion endlessly/Cosmic ocean flows into my heart” (I bet Bruce Johnston loved it), and it’s just about made listenable by an astonishingly good vocal performance from Al Jardine and a decent one by Mike Love, before being killed by syrupy orchestration, and then buried by the coda, in which Brian sings “won’t last forever” in his screechy falsetto, referencing When I Grow Up (To Be A Man), and reminds us just how good the Beach Boys used to be, and how little this has to do with what made them so great.

The next album would be better, but after listening to M.I.U. Album you can tell that everything that had made the Beach Boys great was gone, perhaps forever.

It’s kinda sad.

L.A. (Light Album)

By late 1978, the Beach Boys were in a bad way. They'd signed a new recording contract with CBS Records, but Brian Wilson was in no fit state to contribute anything of significance to the new album. The band had nearly broken up less than a year before, Carl and Dennis were struggling with both relationship and substance problems, M.I.U. Album had been an artistic disaster, and to make matters worse CBS were not very happy. Having paid over eight million dollars for the band, Walter Yetnikoff, the head of CBS, said on hearing a tape of potential new material prepared for him to listen to, "Gentlemen, I think I've just been fucked"... what to do?

The obvious answer was to call in outside production help. They had Jim Guercio, who at this point was the band's manager, occasional on-stage bass player, and record company owner all in one, but they needed somebody who could fill in for Brian in the harmony stack, who could produce, who they were all comfortable with...

They called in Bruce Johnston. He originally came in as a co-producer – the production credits list him separately, with the album being produced by "the Beach Boys, James William Guercio and Bruce Johnston" except for Here Comes The Night, credited to Johnston and Curt Becher [15] . However, he quickly rejoined the band full-time, and has remained in every touring line-up of the Beach Boys ever since, the only consistent member over that thirty-five year period other than Mike Love.

The result, titled L.A. (Light Album), should by rights have been a mess. A collection of rather weak material, strung together from out-takes from 1974, offcuts from Dennis' unreleased Bambu, new recordings, and a desperate attempt

to jump on the disco bandwagon two years too late, it should sound like a horrible failure.

In fact, it’s the last truly good Beach Boys album, and the most cohesive group work since Sunflower. While Love You and Carl And The Passions were both stronger than this by far, this sounded like the Beach Boys again. Unfortunately, the reviews were lousy – far worse than the record deserved – and it only reached number 100 in the US charts, though it made the UK top forty and produced a couple of moderately successful singles.

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Bruce Johnston

Good Timin’

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Carl Wilson

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

The opening song is one where I have to disagree with fan consensus. Most fans, and many of the band members themselves, have considered this a truly great, classic song. Personally, I don’t consider it anything particularly special – the chord sequence is simplistic, and the lyric banal.

But I can see exactly why it's so popular among the band's fanbase – for the first time in years, the harmonies sound like the Beach Boys. Adding Bruce to the mix, focussing on Carl and Al, the strongest singers, and multitracking means there's a thick, luxurious bed of harmonies here the like of which hadn't been seen from the band in nearly a decade.

The song itself seems unfinished – and in fact it was, the track having been stitched together by Guercio cutting and pasting multiple copies of less than a minute of Brian on the keyboards, but the sound was strong enough to push this into the US Top 40 – the band's first single to get there since It's OK.

The song has remained a concert staple for the Beach Boys over the years, and at various times has had live lead vocals by Carl, Dennis, John Stamos and Christian Love (Mike's son). On the 2012 reunion tour, Brian sang lead on the verses and Al on the choruses.

Lady Lynda

Songwriters: Al Jardine and Ron Altbach (based on Jesu, Blebeit Meine Freunde by J.S. Bach)

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

Jesu, Blebeit Meine Freunde (better known in English as Jesu, Joy Of Man's Desiring) had already inspired one of the Beach Boys' biggest hits when Brian Wilson had used it to inspire California Girls, so it's not entirely surprising that

Al Jardine would turn to that piece, one of the most sublime pieces of music ever written, for inspiration.

In fact this song came about more or less as a joke – Ron Altbach, the Beach Boys' touring keyboard player, was playing the Bach piece, and got the idea to play it in the style of his own hit, Dancing In The Moonlight. Jardine got inspired, and wrote the lyrics as a tribute to his then-wife Lynda.

The result is possibly the most 70s record ever. Topped and tailed with straight harpsichord performances of sections of the Bach piece in its original waltz time, the main body of the song recasts it into a (4)/(4) soft-rock style with a vague disco influence and a syrupy, harp-dominated, string arrangement (to which Dennis Wilson apparently contributed, according to Jardine).

The song is cheesy as hell, but thanks to Jardine's utterly sincere lead vocal and some glorious harmonies, it falls just on the right side of the line to be the good kind of cheesy, and it became one of the band's biggest international hits, reaching number six in the UK (though the best it did in the US was number thirty-nine on the Adult Contemporary chart).

After Jardine and his wife divorced, he was less keen on performing the song, for fairly obvious reasons. A horrible remake with new lyrics, done as a tribute to the Statue Of Liberty, Lady Liberty, was recorded in the 1980s, and when the Beach Boys played the UK, Jardine would change the lyrics to "little lady" instead of "lady Lynda".

Full Sail

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Geoffrey Cushing-Murray

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

Carl Wilson's first songwriting contribution since Holland would have fit perfectly on that earlier album, with its nautical theme, stately, plodding pace, and vaguely mystical feel. In fact lyrics like "Does the silence of the sea sound warning of a storm ahead", with their multiple alliteration, feel very like Jack Rieley's work, and with the clanging bell sound effects this could easily be a cousin of Steamboat, albeit one recorded, like the rest of L.A., with a hazy late-70s AOR tinge to it.

This isn't a song that gets a lot of love from Beach Boys fans, but to my mind it's the best song on the record to this point, its placid gentleness perfectly summing up the feeling of floating out to sea.

Angel Come Home

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Geoffrey Cushing-Murray

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

Carl Wilson's second songwriting contribution to L.A. is easily the best thing on the record up to this point. It's harmonically simplistic – only I, IV and V chords – but that's appropriate for a song which seems, under the AOR strings and electric piano, to be a country rocker. The layers of keyboards and broken drum

pattern here almost sound like Love You, but given a thicker arrangement and sounding almost disturbing.

Had this been done more straightforwardly, like Carl's later solo albums, it would have sounded horrific, but the layers of synths, the slightly off-key backing vocals (Brian Wilson's only vocal contribution to the album), the strings, and Dennis' gruff, slurred vocals, all combine to accentuate the slightly unusual parts of the song (like the chord changes that come partway through a bar) and turn it into a classic longing song of lost love.

Andrew Doe's book states that this track dates back to 1976, but his website, updated more recently, places the sessions in 1978.

Love Surrounds Me

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson and Geoffrey Cushing-Murray

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

This track was originally recorded for Dennis' abortive Bambu, with various working titles as Dennis had not yet come up with a lyric for it. Once the band decided to pull together for L.A. (Light Album), a cassette of the backing track was given to Carl's writing partner Cushing-Murray, who came up with the lyric and vocal melody, neither of which Dennis was reportedly very happy with.

Dennis continued to record overdubs for the track for a long time, discarding

woodwind and banjo parts, before finally coming up with the released version, which is driven by Dennis' electric piano and Mini-Moog and the bass playing of Joe Chemay .

Despite the tortuous process by which it came about, Love Surrounds Me is one of the finest tracks on the album, as well as one of Dennis' most conventionally structured. It starts out with a slow intro establishing the basic harmonic material (extended Am, Em and Dm chords), before going into two verses, each made up of three repetitions of the same basic eight-bar sequence. After the first verse, there is a brief bridge dominated by electric piano and wordless vocals, and at the end of the song there's a repeated tag, but for once at this stage of his life Dennis was able to pull together a song into a proper structure.

Dennis also puts in one of his best vocal performances of his latter career here, really selling the song, but the real star of the track is Christine McVie of Fleetwood Mac, Dennis' then-girlfriend, who provides the wordless high vocal right at the top of her range, in possibly her best ever performance as a vocalist.

The other Beach Boys make minimal backing vocal contributions, and a version without their vocals was released on the Pacific Ocean Blue Legacy Edition double CD.

Sumahama

Songwriter: Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

Oddly, while the Beach Boys were having difficulty pulling together their first album for CBS, Mike Love recorded two solo albums simultaneously – First Love and Country Love, both thankfully unreleased.

This song was originally recorded for First Love, before being rerecorded less than a month later as Mike's sole creative contribution to L.A.

The song itself isn't at all bad – it has the same play-in-a-day style and mellow melodic feel as Mike's other solo compositions for the band – and Mike sounds excellent on the verses. Unfortunately, the decision to add in a third chord, effectively changing the key up a fourth, for the choruses, means that he sounds nasal and whiny on those. This, combined with the faux-Oriental Hollywood japonaiserie of the string arrangement, and the bizarre decision to sing the last verse in an approximation of Japanese, dooms the track to failure. But while it's easily the worst track on side one, it's not terrible, and is better than all but the best tracks on M.I.U.

Here Comes The Night

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

There is no excuse for this at all. Showing their usual flair for timing, the Beach Boys decided to make a cash-in disco track right at the time the "Disco Sucks" campaign was about to take off.

This, in itself, wouldn't necessarily have been a bad thing, but they chose to work with Curt Becher, an old friend of Bruce's. In the 1960s, Becher (then working as Curt Boettcher) had been one of the most outstanding and original sunshine pop producers around, but by the late 70s he was making terrible disco records, often of old calypso songs and often featuring Johnston, under the name California Music.

Anyone who's heard those records can tell that this isn't a Beach Boys record, but a California Music record with Carl Wilson on lead vocals. Apparently the bulk of the backing vocals were completed by non-Beach Boys, although Mike, Carl, Al and Bruce added a final layer (Dennis refused to have anything to do with this).

The seven inch version of the track, a remake of the Wild Honey song, wasn't actually too bad, and had quite a few nice moments. It wasn't good, but it was competent. Unfortunately the twelve-inch mix surrounded that competent four minutes thirty with an extra six minutes of "night, oh oh" sung through vocoders, "ooh"s, and tedium. Even more unfortunately, they decided to put an even longer mix than that on here – this version lasts an astonishing ten minutes and fifty-one seconds.

This was released as a single and bombed horribly, and was soon dropped from the band's set as the audience booed it regularly. Had they included the 7" version on the album it might now be something that was up for a revisionist, positive critical appraisal. As it is, it's eleven minutes at the start of side two that kill all the momentum stone dead.

Baby Blue

Songwriters: Dennis Wilson, Gregg Jakobson and Karen Lamm

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson and Dennis Wilson

This, on the other hand, is spell-bindingly beautiful. A love song to Dennis' then-wife Karen, it was originally intended for Bambu, but fits perfectly on here.

The verse, on which Carl takes the lead, has a wonderfully clever little chord sequence – starting on the tonic (F#), the chord moves up to the third, but leaving the I note in the bass (making a ninth chord). But then the key changes down a tone, and this time the tonic of the new key has the third in the bass (creating a very unsettling effect), before the move up a third again, while leaving the bass where it is, resolves the tension.

That four-bar sequence is repeated three times, with Carl singing right at the top of his register, giving what may be his last truly magnificent vocal, aching with a beautiful longing over a harmony stack that sounds like just Carl and Dennis.

We then get a middle section, sung by Dennis at his huskiest, over a chord sequence that repeats the trick he used in Forever of keeping the chord steady while having the bass-line descend in tones. Not only is this good in itself, but the slightly baroque feel it gives this section helps tie the album together, unintentionally echoing back to the Bach references in Lady Lynda.

And then finally, we get a repeat of the verse material to fade, but this time with the addition of, out of nowhere, a dissonant squawk of horns (a wonderfully Dennis touch).

Much of LA is a triumph of style over substance – relatively weak material polished to perfection and wonderfully performed. Here we see the same sound applied to a genuinely great song, one that is both musically clever and emotionally heartfelt, and the results are staggering.

Goin' South

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Geoffrey Cushing-Murray

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

Carl's last song on L.A. is a less successful attempt to get the same kind of feel as Full Sail. There are some nice moments – "Snowdrifts blowing up against my door" is lovely – but the lounge sax and soporific tempo make this one of the less interesting tracks on the album.

Shortenin' Bread

Songwriter: trad. arr. Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson and Dennis Wilson

And the album finishes off with the only real rocker on the record, and it's wonderful. Shortenin' Bread has always been an obsession to Brian Wilson – he's based several songs (mostly unreleased) around the riff – and he'd recorded two versions of the track earlier, one with American Spring and one for Adult/Child.

This rerecording of an arrangement very like the Adult/Child one is absolutely, ridiculously, wonderful. The song is beefed up into a rock arrangement with squealing guitars, Carl doing a throat-tearing intense lead, and Dennis singing the choruses as a doo-wop bass part, so low it sounds almost exactly like Mike Love.

It's goofy, silly, and everything that the Beach Boys are about, and makes you glad to be alive.

Keepin’ The Summer Alive

After the commercial and critical failure of L.A. (Light Album), CBS insisted that the next Beach Boys record have a reasonable amount of actual Brian Wilson involvement. Unfortunately, Brian Wilson wasn’t in any state to do anything much. The group went into the studio with Chuck Britz, the engineer who had worked with Brian on much of their best 60s output, but all they cut were four uninspiring covers of oldies – School Day (Ring Ring Goes The Bell), Little Girl, Jamaica Farewell and Stranded In The Jungle – before it became clear that he wasn’t going to be capable of producing the record.

Instead, the band turned again to Bruce Johnston as producer, and managed to get enough new Brian Wilson songs together to make the album look like a respectable effort – until you play it.

This is, by far, the worst Beach Boys album up to that point. While Dennis Wilson is pictured on the cover (a cover which itself tells the whole story – a bad painting of the ageing band performing in a sealed glass bubble full of sand and palm trees, in the middle of a polar winter, watched only by a penguin, two polar bears, and a woman in a bikini) he refused to be involved with what he thought was a substandard selection of songs (though he was also suspended from the band around this time after a fight with Mike Love), and can only be heard on one track.

The songs are uninspired, the vocals hoarse and off-key, the instrumental arrangements bludgeoning... the actual sound of the record is good, thanks to the temporary return of engineer Steve Desper, but good engineering can’t save terrible songs, performances and arrangements.

The first Beach Boys album of the 1980s would also be the last to be even nominally by the band's classic line-up, and it's a sad way for them to go out.

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Bruce Johnston

Keepin' The Summer Alive

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Randy Bachman

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

The album doesn't start too unpromisingly. The first twenty seconds of this are actually quite promising – Mike Love doing a wonderfully goofy reprise of his Louie Louie bass vocals – before the squealing rawk guitars come in.

This is one of two songs written and co-produced by Carl Wilson with Randy Bachman (of The Guess Who and Bachman-Turner Overdrive), and it shows his new fascination with crunchy, guitar-driven AOR, a style that would unfortunately blight all the rest of his songs.

The song itself seems to have been written as a joke – the three-chord verse/chorus chord sequence is in fact the Louie Louie sequence played backwards – and the parts where it's allowed to be a goofy, fun track are OK. But too much of it involves guitar sounds that wouldn't be out of place on a Huey Lewis And The News track, played by Joe Walsh of the Eagles.

Oh Darlin'

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson and Mike Love

This terrible, plodding ballad started out as listenable, if not great – there's a version of this on bootlegs that has a very stripped-down instrumental arrangement, and one of Brian's very best late-period vocals, and it doesn't sound half-bad. Had it been left like that, it would have been one of those little nice tracks that everyone forgets about but, when reminded of them, likes.

Instead, several big mistakes were made. The lyrics were rewritten to make them even worse – and they weren't good to start with. The instrumental arrangement was overlaid with tons of unnecessary instruments, including a strange horn arrangement that sounds like something between an accordion and a swarm of angry bees. Brian's pleasant, if hoarse, guide vocal was replaced by a lazy, almost contemptuous, vocal from Carl, a nasal middle eight from Mike, and a strange, unpleasant, backing vocal arrangement.

But worst of all, they made the same mistake they made on seemingly every track in this period – on the tag, Bruce starts singing "God only knows/how I

love only you", which just reminds the listener that they could be listening to a much, much better song.

Some Of Your Love

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

Easily the best uptempo song on the album, this saxophone-driven uptempo riff-rocker was originally recorded during the M.I.U. Album sessions under the title Mike Come Back To LA, and appears from the video footage of those sessions to have been a largely spur-of-the-moment exercise.

The energy from that session still shines through in the backing track, which is based around two very simple two-chord riffs (I-vi for the verses and V-IV for the choruses), and as long as the track is just a honking sax overdub, that backing track, and the band singing "some, some, some of your love" over and over, it's a lot of fun.

The mood dissipates somewhat on the verses, where Mike takes a nasal lead, singing lines like "She's got my vote for number one in the class/I couldn't help but try to make a forward pass", but the biggest misstep is in the bridge, where again they reference a much better old song, this time having Carl sing "kiss me baby, hold me tight tonight".

But it’s fun enough, it’s lightweight and it knows it, but it would have made a perfectly acceptable follow-up single for Celebration after Almost Summer.

Livin’ With A Heartache

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Randy Bachman

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

The second Wilson/Bachman collaboration is much, much better than the first. A simple country song, it’s structured around a long, twenty-two-bar chorus (which itself breaks down into an eight-bar, two-chord pseudo-verse in an almost ska rhythm, an eight-bar, three-chord bridge, a two-bar breakdown, and a four-bar repeat of the pseudo-verse) and an eight-bar verse based around a variation of the bridge chords taken at a slower pace.

Unfortunately, less effort seems to have gone into the lyrics, so this country-ska, strange-number-of-bars song is lumbered with lyrics that must have taken literally seconds to write, lines like “after all this time, I still wish you were mine, I miss you every day, come back to me and stay”.

Those lyrics should sink the track altogether, but luckily Carl gives his best vocal performance of the album here. According to Steve Desper, when recording the lead vocal Carl was so drunk that he had to lean against a barn wall while singing. Even so, his vocal holds the track together and carries real conviction.

This track apparently features no Beach Boys other than Carl Wilson, with the backing vocals provided by Curt Becher, Terry Melcher and Jon Joyce. I say apparently because while Becher in particular is clearly audible in the vocal stack, one of the vocalists sounds very like Bruce Johnston.

This was released as the second single from the album, and didn't chart.

Four songs in and we've finally had one that doesn't rely on references to older, better songs. Possibly things are going to get better from here on in?

School Day (Ring Ring Goes The Bell)

Songwriter: Chuck Berry

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

Chuck Berry covers had been good to the band before, so why not try it again?

And this is, if nothing else, far better than the cover of Rock & Roll Music that had been the band's biggest hit of the 70s. While the a capella intro does the band no favours, by exposing just how weak their voices now were, Al gives a typically strong, exuberant performance on lead vocals, although the 50s style reverb added to them doesn't work all that well.

The arrangement is perfunctory, and it fades out early rather than coming to a proper climax, but this is a good enough song that just by playing it straight and not messing anything up too much, it becomes one of the better tracks on the record.

Goin’ On

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Carl Wilson

The lead single, and the first track of side two, is this plodding doo-wop flavoured track. The track was originally titled Why Didn’t I Tell You and featured an incongruous drum solo, before being edited together into its present form.

It just...doesn’t quite work. Nothing on the track is irredeemable (well, maybe the sax solo), there are a lot of interesting musical ideas (the opening, with the band’s harmonies spreading out wider and wider, is something they’d first tried with the unreleased All Dressed Up For School), and it’s easily Love’s best lyric of the album, but the general feeling is of a poor man’s Good Timin’ (and that track is itself nowhere near as good as its reputation). And again, the track just fades without coming to any resolution.

Sunshine

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

This track started out as a Brian-produced cover version of the Crystals' Little Boy, retitled Little Girl, before someone had the bright idea that they could take the backing track, edit it a bit, put new lyrics on it, and call it a new original from Brian and Mike.

The result is a mess, consisting of the Little Girl track, reworked as a bad calypso track in the style of some of Curt Becher's California Music singles, with a backing vocal line taken from the old doo-wop song Smokey Places by the Corsairs, and with the caterwauling excuses for harmonies that ruin much of this record.

This is not only joyless itself, it points the way to the band's future attempts at Caribbean-style music, none of which ended well at all.

When Girls Get Together

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Brian Wilson

Even when digging into their back catalogue, the band can’t seem to get it right. This track was originally recorded during the sessions for Sunflower, and has that album’s sound all over it, from the marxophone (a type of zither) in the top of the arrangement to the banjo and horns underneath.

But the vocal melody doesn’t fit the scansion of the lyrics at all, and the lyrics themselves have more of the stamp of Brian in eccentric mode than of Mike – “When girls get together, they don’t waste time on things like weather and stuff/They all just play around and never seem to discuss it enough”. The vocal arrangement is also odd, just Brian and Mike singing in near-unison, and the whole thing feels like an interesting experiment that doesn’t quite come off.

It’s better than much of the dreck on here, but given the vast quantities of wonderful music the band had recorded and not yet released, how this got chosen to be pulled from the vaults is a mystery.

Santa Ana Winds

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Al Jardine

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine with the group

This is another track that has a curious gestation, having started out in a very different arrangement during the L.A. (Light Album) sessions, with totally different lyrics (“On my porch/thinkin’ about the torch/I been carrying for you so long”).

All of that track was stripped away except for Brian’s chorus vocals and harmonica part, and it was rebuilt as a rather lovely, folky little track carried by acoustic guitars, banjo, strings and Al’s multi-tracked vocals.

This has a lot of the flavour of California Saga about it, from the spoken intro to the acoustic guitars and the slightly mystical lyrics about California. In fact it was planned originally as part of another themed trilogy, along with Looking Down The Coast and Monterey. The latter two songs were eventually resurrected, under just the first name, on Al’s A Postcard From California.

While the rest of the album ranges from horribly poor to merely competent, this is the only track which is an actual pleasure to listen to.

Endless Harmony

Songwriter: Bruce Johnston

Lead vocalist: Bruce Johnston and Carl Wilson

This, on the other hand, is just horrible. Bruce’s first songwriting contribution to the band since Disney Girls actually dates back to 1972, when it was titled Ten Years’ Harmony. It’s the first example, and one of the worst, of the band self-mythologising, as Bruce sings about just how great the Beach Boys are.

It starts out bad, with Bruce on electric piano singing solo, much like Going Public, and all the augmented, ninth and minor sixth chords just make this sound

like the worst kind of lounge singer nonsense. And the lyrics are just terrible – “Ocean lovers, who like to harmonise/they’re all cousins, friends and brothers, and they make their mamas cry...”

Then at 2:15 the drums kick in (Dennis’ only appearance on the album) and Carl starts to sing, and the lyrics get even worse – “and we sang God Bless America/It’s the land where we tour/She takes great care of us/And people love the way we sing...”

This kind of self-congratulatory nonsense would be bad even were it on a record that showed any sign at all of being the work of people who deserved congratulation, but after thirty-five minutes of lazy, incompetent, badly-sung dreck that leaves one with no goodwill towards the band at all, it’s frankly nauseating.

And then it ends with twenty seconds of utterly gorgeous harmony, topped with a pure, lovely falsetto from Bruce. It’s lovely, but if anything it adds insult to injury. In the context of just this song, it’s “look what we can do!”

In the context of the album, however, it’s “look what we could have done if we’d tried.” The singing on this album as a whole is inexcusably bad, and to be shown twenty seconds before the end that they could have done better if they’d tried just makes it all the worse.

This song was used as the theme tune for the 1999 TV documentary of the same name about the band.

Live At Knebworth

1980 saw the only European tour of the classic six-man line-up of the Beach Boys. Dennis Wilson was back in the band after his temporary suspension, Bruce had returned to the fold, and Brian was there in body, if not always in spirit.

The highlight of the tour was a performance at the Knebworth Festival on June 21. At the time, the Beach Boys were still producing big hits in the UK – Lady Lynda had been a top ten hit – and the show was filmed, for a potential twentieth anniversary video.

The show as released on DVD and CD is not quite the same one that people saw at the time, though. Several songs were cut, partly because the performances of them were poor, and a lot of overdubbing was done on the basic tracks afterwards – Mark Linnett, the engineer who mixed the CD and DVD release, has said that about seventy-five per cent of the tracks have an additional single layer of backing vocals overdubbed and some keyboard and guitar sweetening, but that no new lead vocals were recorded. Others who have heard the unsweetened original recordings say that more was altered than that.

To my ears, there has clearly been quite a bit of doctoring done – some auto-tune applied to some of the vocals (but applied in the way in which it was intended, to fix the odd bum note), and some double-tracking done. More importantly, things have been mixed out, like Brian deciding to play totally different songs on the piano.

The result is, if not a totally accurate representation of the band around 1980, a

more-or-less honest one. This is what the Beach Boys sounded like during the last time they were really a band in any meaningful sense. The bulk of the instruments, and nearly all the vocals, are provided by the band, which is something that would not be true even a year later.

For anyone who wants proof of this, incidentally, it's instructive to compare the versions of the songs here to those on the Good Vibrations Tour DVD (a DVD of the 1976 TV special popularly known as It's OK). In particular, compare the version of You Are So Beautiful here with the one on that DVD, and you can clearly hear what Bruce Johnston's piano adds to the band's sound.

And what's interesting is how different this version of the band sounded from the records. The arrangements are chopped-down, ruthlessly streamlined versions of those on the studio recordings. Subtlety goes out the window in favour of a muscular rock sound and a hard back-beat.

This was a deliberate attempt to get a thicker sound – when Carl Wilson left the band briefly in 1981, Jeff Foskett (who has worked with the band members off and on ever since) took over some of his parts, and tried to replicate exactly the single-string guitar lines on the original records. When Carl saw him perform live, he said "You know, a guitar has six strings". But at the same time it also made the songs easier to perform.

The result is something that, while certainly not a bad live album by any means, doesn't repay repeated listening hugely. The DVD, on the other hand, is an essential purchase, and captures the excitement of a live show perfectly. It's particularly touching to watch the other band members' concern for Brian, who is clearly unwell at this point.

As I've already covered all these songs before, I'll just deal briefly with them to

note the differences from the studio versions. Some observations that apply to all of them:

Mike Love is not in especially good voice, but Carl Wilson and Al Jardine sound superb.

Brian and Dennis are largely absent from the harmonies – Brian for obvious reasons, Dennis because he was behind the drum-kit for much of the show.

line-up

Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love, Bruce Johnston

backing band

Ed Carter (guitar), Joe Chemay (bass, vocals), Bobby Figueroa (percussion, drums, vocals), Mike Meros (keyboards)

California Girls

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

This is taken at a faster pace than the record, but is done pretty much exactly how you'd expect, given the instrumental limitations. Al Jardine takes the falsetto part and does a very good job.

Sloop John B

Songwriter: trad arr Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Brian Wilson, Mike Love, Carl Wilson

This is a simplified version of the arrangement from the record – no flute, obviously (the flute intro is played on keyboard), but also without the a capella section. Brian Wilson takes lead on the first verse, and this may be the earliest example of his late period voice – less husky than from 76 to 79, but harsh and shouted. Al Jardine doubles him on the first chorus, Mike Love takes his usual part, and Carl Wilson sings the last verse, as well as playing the twelve-string guitar. This is one of several songs that have annoying feedback screeches – an unfortunate artefact of the live recording.

Darlin'

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

This was the first track from this recording to be released, on the Endless Harmony soundtrack, and with good reason. While it's a typically dense, airless instrumental arrangement, and misses the horns, Carl Wilson turns in a stunning lead vocal performance here. His little improvised phrase at the end of the recording ("I keep dreaming 'bout Darlin"') has, since the track was released in 1999, become a formal part of the arrangement when any of the various Beach Boys bands perform this song live.

School Days

Songwriter: Chuck Berry

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

This is to all intents and purposes indistinguishable from the studio recording, except with lots of space for Eddie Carter to play a twiddly guitar solo.

God Only Knows

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Tony Asher

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

As always, with the pre-1996 Beach Boys, this is a simplified arrangement of the song – not just in that there are no flutes or French horns, but in that the staccato instrumental section is skipped altogether.

Al Jardine takes Brian Wilson's falsetto part (sounding like he's double-tracked in parts), and Mike Love the lower "ba ba ba" part, while Bruce replicates his part from the record, but Carl Wilson is the star here, giving a performance which, while possibly not as good as the one on Live In London, is still the highlight of this album.

When the Beach Boys reunited in 2012, they performed this song to Carl's pre-recorded lead, with Carl projected on a video screen. It was this performance they used for both the lead vocal and the video, and so the lead vocal from this performance also turns up on the 50th Anniversary Tour live double CD.

Be True To Your School

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

A fairly straight reading of this song, unlike later performances where Mike would stretch the word "when" out to ridiculous lengths. Mike Meros takes the "On Wisconsin" organ solo.

Do It Again

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love with Carl Wilson

Again, the instrumental arrangement here is rather overloaded with a surfeit of electric guitars, but it’s otherwise relatively close to what you’d expect. Carl Wilson harmonises with Mike Love on the bridge and plays the guitar solo.

Little Deuce Coupe

Songwriters: Brian Wilson, Roger Christian and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

This is pretty much exactly what you’d expect this song to sound like.

Cottonfields/Heroes & Villains

Songwriters: Huddie Ledbetter/Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine with Carl Wilson

Here Dennis Wilson switches from the drums to being part of the front-line, on vocals and occasional piano, while Bobby Figueroa becomes the main drummer for the next few songs. It's hard to tell because of the way the DVD is edited, but Brian Wilson may be absent from these songs altogether.

These two songs are performed as a medley, and Cottonfields again is simplified and shortened, with no a capella break or steel guitar. Heroes And Villains, though, is performed in the rock arrangement they'd used in the early 70s, with Jardine taking lead on the verse, Carl singing the "Bicycle rider" lyrics on the chorus, and Love singing "Heroes, a heroes, a heroes and a villains".

Here they do attempt the a capella break, and the full a capella final verse (unlike on earlier tours) and it works wonderfully, whether thickened in the studio or not. Dennis also adds in an impromptu "we love you!" and some vocal "whoa"s on the tag. This is an absolute tour de force.

Happy Birthday Brian

Songwriters: Mildred And Patty Hill

Lead vocalist: Audience

Here Brian returned to the stage, Dennis seems to have left, and the audience sang “happy birthday” to Brian, as his birthday was the previous night. This doesn’t appear on the DVD, as the sync rights for the song Happy Birthday are prohibitively expensive.

Keepin’ The Summer Alive

Songwriters: Carl Wilson and Randy Bachman

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson

Largely indistinguishable from the studio recording, but with a better lead vocal from Carl, who was really on staggeringly good form for this show. On the DVD, at least, it’s clear that while this isn’t much of a song, it would at least have been very exciting live. Even Brian appears engaged.

Lady Lynda

Songwriters: Al Jardine and Ron Altbach

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

This is another performance with stunningly good vocals. One might question how good the vocals were live, given that at points here three Al Jardines (Als

Jardine?) are audible, but they were apparently good enough for them to perform the a capella break and outro twice – Mike Love shouts “one more time!” after the song ends, and they perform that section again.

The major difference from the studio version here is the lack of strings and harpsichord. Meros plays the Jesu, Blebeit Meine Freunde intro on the piano, and Johnston plays some of the harpsichord trills on the electric piano. From the video and audio evidence neither Brian nor Dennis are on this song.

Surfer Girl

Songwriter: Brian Wilson

Lead vocalist: Group and Brian Wilson

This is quite lovely, with the verse and chorus harmonies dominated by Dennis (with Al taking Brian’s high harmony part), and Brian taking the solo lead on the bridge. The tinkly keyboard part is perhaps a bit obtrusive, but otherwise this is very, very nice.

Help Me Rhonda

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Al Jardine

This is the same beefed-up rock arrangement that the band had performed on In Concert, with Brian and Dennis on keyboards and Bruce on bass. Mike Love doubles Al on the first verse, until his own harmony part comes in.

I've never been a fan of this arrangement, but this is a perfectly competent, enthusiastic, performance of it.

Rock And Roll Music

Songwriter: Chuck Berry

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

Again, this is much like the record, but taken slightly faster and with louder guitars. A perfectly reasonable performance of an uninspiring arrangement.

I Get Around

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Bobby Figueroa

Another slightly more muscular, thicker arrangement than on the record, this time in large part because Dennis continues drumming throughout the verses. Bobby Figueroa takes the falsetto part here, mixed fairly low, and does a competent enough job, but he doesn't have a "Beach Boy" voice, and the result sounds slightly off.

Surfin' USA

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Chuck Berry

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

No different than you'd expect from this kind of performance.

You Are So Beautiful

Songwriters: Billy Preston and Bruce Fisher

Lead vocalist: Dennis Wilson

The first encore for this show, as so many in the late 70s and early 80s, was this Billy Preston song that had been a hit for Joe Cocker a few years earlier. Dennis Wilson, who had a similarly husky voice to Cocker's, sings lead as Meros and Johnston accompany him on two pianos.

It's quite lovely, although many might question why Dennis chose to perform someone else's hit. The reason, apparently, is that Dennis co-wrote this, or at least claimed he did. According to reports from author Jon Stebbins, Billy Hinsche saw Dennis at a party when Billy Preston was noodling with this song, and Dennis was apparently with him, helping him work on it. Dennis later claimed to other people that he'd helped Preston write it.

Preston, when asked about this, later denied ever even having met Dennis Wilson.

On the one hand, this song sounds more like Dennis' work than most of Preston's, and Billy Hinsche has no reason to lie. On the other, there are already two credited writers to this song, and it's frankly so simplistic that it wouldn't even take one writer to have come up with it.

Whether it's partly Dennis' work or not (and I lean towards believing it is), he certainly makes it his here, and this is a highlight of the album.

Good Vibrations

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Carl Wilson and Mike Love

A strong performance of this song. Good Vibrations is an odd song: nearly-identical performances of it, trying to stick as closely to the record as possible, can emphasise very different facets of the track. In this case, the emphasis is on the heavy R&B aspects of the track.

Bruce doubles Carl on the “I hear the sound of a...” part, and the “gotta keep those lovin’ good...” section is extended into a long audience singalong that lasts almost as long as the rest of the song, at the end of which the band scat a short multi-part harmony section while the audience sing. Similarly, the repetition of the chorus for the tag is extended while Carl scats a “wop-diddy-bop-diddy” vocal line that’s not heard anywhere else.

Barbara Ann

Songwriter: Fred Fassert

Lead vocalist: Mike Love and Al Jardine

It’s a loud rock version of Barbara Ann. Al Jardine takes the falsetto part, and does a better job than Dean Torrence. Bruce plays bass.

Fun Fun Fun

Songwriters: Brian Wilson and Mike Love

Lead vocalist: Mike Love

A loud, slightly sloppy, performance with a ton of energy. Carl Wilson takes the distorted lead guitar. Al takes the falsetto during the choruses, with Bruce singing the high “away”s over the very extended tag.

Carl Wilson

In 1981, the Beach Boys were a shambles. They'd just put out a terrible album, Dennis Wilson was spiralling down into the self-destructive spiral that would soon lead to his death, Brian Wilson was ballooning in weight, and the band were putting on poor shows, joylessly grinding out the hits yet again.

So it was unsurprising that when Carl Wilson's eponymous solo record, recorded the previous December, was released, he announced that he wouldn't be touring and recording with them, "until they decide 1981 means as much to them as 1961", in a press release that also stated that there had "hardly been a full Beach Boys rehearsal in more than a year" and that he didn't want to play "multinight engagements in Lake Tahoe and Las Vegas and places like that".

What was surprising, however, was the album. Where Dennis' solo recordings had shown the untapped potential in an overlooked talent, Carl's showed the opposite. While the vocal performances are never less than excellent, the music is dull, plodding AOR, the type of thing that might easily have been recorded by Bryan Adams.

Carl's main collaborator was Myrna Smith (later Myrna Smith-Schilling), the then partner of the band's manager Jerry Schilling. She was a great singer (she was a member of the Sweet Inspirations, who as well as their own hits also sang back-up for Aretha Franklin and Elvis Presley, and performed on Van Morrison's Brown-Eyed Girl) and carried her weight as a backing vocalist, but seemed not to bring out the best in Carl.

The album was recorded by a very small core band – Wilson and Smith, along with John Daly on guitar, James Guercio on bass and guitar, James Stroud on drums, with additional musicians limited for the most part to the odd tambourine or saxophone overdub – and produced by James Guercio. It only charted in the US at number 175, for the very good reason that it wasn't actually any good. It's not as bad as M.I.U. or Keepin' The Summer Alive, but it's not something that has any reason to exist, either.

(All songs are written by Carl Wilson and Myrna Smith, except where noted).

Hold Me

The album's first single was this plodding rocker, a duet between Wilson and Smith. There is next to nothing interesting to say about it. The production is straightforwardly dull, with a clomping drum part dominated by hi-hat and cowbell, and a strangely swimmy guitar sound. And the song itself is as basic as it's possible to get – a dull I-V riff for the verse (sung by Wilson), a brief bridge sung by Smith (chord sequence vi-I-vi-V), then a chorus sung by both, over the same dull riff as the verse. Repeat. That's it.

There's not even a middle eight or a solo to break the monotony, just a near-endless repetition of the chorus (actually lasting only eighty-five seconds, but feeling like much more). Tedious in the extreme. Nice vocals though.

Bright Lights

With its semi-disco beat under standard doo-wop changes for the verse, this

beats the previous track in that the chorus is made of different musical material than the verse is. In fact there's even a key change between the verse and the chorus, though only a change to the subdominant, about as banal a change as it gets.

But we don't need Carl Wilson singing in an over-reverbed voice over a synth bass "Take a number in my black book/And promise to call".

And again there's a stunning lack of craft here – the structure is just verse-chorus-verse-chorus-verse-verse-repeat chorus to fade. Nothing at all to disrupt the monotony. Nice vocals though.

What You Gonna Do About Me?

This track seems to be recorded to the same click track as the last one. There does seem, however, to have been some actual thought put into the track. There's a verse, a bridge, and a key change into the chorus (and it's a key change down a tone, which is more interesting). There's even a rudimentary instrumental break, some changes in the dynamics, and an overdub of what sounds like a Jew's harp on the chorus to make it stand out.

However, to make sure that nobody accidentally gets a feeling stronger than a mild sense of ennui from this record, the last two minutes and nine seconds of the track's four minute twenty-nine running time are (apart from a quick drop down to just the drums) a repeat of the chorus musical material, over and over, with no new ideas. And the lyrics are the worst so far, being the whinging of a Nice Guy complaining he's in the 'friend zone' ("I'm the one you keep on running to after they've walked all over you/I'm the one who dries your lonely tears, so what you gonna do about me?")

Nice vocals though.

The Right Lane

Another song at approximately the same tempo, but this one's definitely the 'rock' one, because the guitars are crunchier and the drums are being hit harder.

This is another one with a straight A-B-A-B structure, this time alternating between a two-chord (charitably – the two chords are E7 and E7sus4) verse and a four-chord bridge. Once again we have the last two minutes and forty-four seconds of the song being an extended repetition of the two-chord riff.

This song's distinguishing feature (all the songs so far seem to have precisely one) is that it has an actual solo, quite early in the track. There's even an amusing little 'pew' noise repeated during the solo and fade.

What's most ridiculous is that the lyrics to this song are all about breaking the mould, doing something different, breaking away, and yet this is the fourth song in a row to be, to all intents and purposes, interchangeable.

Nice vocals, though.

Hurry Love

Old habits die hard. As we've discussed before, the Beach Boys' albums had, on occasion, been sequenced into an uptempo side A and a slower side B, a legacy of the early rock era when there would be a side 'for the kids' and a side 'for the grown-ups'. Whether deliberately or not, Wilson emulates that here, so while side one had four rockers, three of the four tracks on this side are ballads.

Immediately things start feeling slightly better, because for a ballad you have to have an actual song, and just not having the same bludgeoning drums and crunchy guitars makes this song seem like a relief. This one even has a middle eight.

The track is, overall, quite pleasant. Nothing special, but Carl Wilson singing even a mediocre song, over a backing of acoustic guitars and hand percussion, is always going to be at least listenable. This is up to the standards of such Beach Boys filler tracks as Sweet Sunday Kind Of Love or Full Sail, and was the B-side to both singles from the album.

Nice vocals.

Heaven

Songwriters: Carl Wilson, Myrna Smith, Michael Sun

The second single was this ballad, the only song to involve a songwriter other than Wilson and Smith. On this evidence they should have had Michael Sun work with them more.

That’s not to say this song is as good as its reputation – since Carl Wilson’s untimely death in 1998, this song has, at least among Beach Boys fans, taken on something like the status of Forever and God Only Knows, but it’s very inferior to those songs. But it is a good song – something that has been lacking up until this point.

In fact it seems far more like a Beach Boys track than a solo track, right down to the lyrics about “The gentle waves of love in motion, and the warmth of summer sun”, and this gives Carl the chance to show that he could be a whole Beach Boys by himself, performing some absolutely lovely multi-tracked harmony parts, and singing what may be the highest falsetto part he ever sang on the line “Heaven could be here on Earth” – so high he’s clearly straining for the notes.

As a single, this flopped, but it was performed off and on in Beach Boys shows for several years later, and Brian Wilson recorded a solo version in 2007.

Very nice vocals.

The Grammy

This is probably the best of the uptempo songs, mostly because of the dropped beats in the chorus, but also because it bothers to have a middle eight (and the high vocals on the middle eight are by far the most interesting thing on any of the rockers here, sounding almost like Queen or Sparks).

But it’s a petulant whine of a song. Apparently inspired by Billy Joel, it casts

Wilson as a rock star snubbing the Grammy awards (“You invite me to pick up my award, after all the time I’ve been out here/My music is still the same, why is it just now getting there?”) and being more interested in art than awards, while the multi-tracked Greek chorus backing vocals sing “We thought you wanted to be a star?/Who the hell do you think you are?”

Of course, this principled renunciation of the Grammies and all that they stand for would have had nothing to do with the fact that the Beach Boys themselves had never actually won a Grammy award.

(For the record, when the Nobel committee come calling about giving me the prize for literature for this book, I shall definitely turn it down.)

Nice vocals, though.

Seems So Long Ago

And we get another ballad, and so another actual song. Unfortunately it’s a banal, plodding song, with a hugely overextended sax solo. The lyrics are doggerel that wouldn’t even measure up for a Hallmark card (“I can see Mom and Dad and the house we had/The trees in the yard and how Dad worked so hard/The good times we shared and how much they cared”) and once again a hugely overextended fade nearly doubles the length of the song.

So at the end of the album (while it only has eight songs, it’s actually a respectable length – it’s just all the songs are at least two minutes too long), the feeling one gets after listening is... “well, that was certainly a recording of some musicians playing some songs.” That’s about as much of a strong opinion as it’s

possible to muster about this album.

Nice vocals, though.

Looking Back With Love

OK, I suppose I have to get it over with...even though this was never released on CD, I should include it here for completeness' sake.

I have tried, in these essays, to be as objective as I can. Yes, some of the reviews have been harsh, but I have tried wherever possible to find something positive to say. The Beach Boys put out some material that was sub-par, but never usually less than interesting.

But Mike Love's only released solo album (he recorded two in 1978 and one in 2004 that remain unreleased) is awfully, appallingly, unreasonably terrible. Despite the involvement of Curt Becher as producer, and of Brian Wilson on one track, this is easily the worst album ever to involve any of the Beach Boys, if not the worst album ever released.

And it's strictly a problem with the album, not with Love himself. Mike Love is a bogeyman to many Beach Boys fans, but it's perfectly imaginable that he could make a very good solo album. His side projects with Celebration, while outside the scope of this book, were listenable. He's written many good lyrics, and his bass and baritone register vocals are often spectacular.

But this album shows no evidence whatsoever of these talents. It's a vile, nasty thing. And the problem is, by saying this I know it will encourage people to listen to it. Don't.

There is a whole field of study designed to creating warnings to stop future archaeologists from investigating nuclear waste dumps. The problem is to come up with something that warns them off without inviting curiosity, and the more you protect something and warn people off, the more they want to see it. The message they attempt to communicate is [16] in part:

This place is not a place of honor…no highly esteemed deed is commemorated here… nothing valued is here.

What is here is dangerous and repulsive to us. This message is a warning about danger.

The idea is to warn off the curious. Some things are best left undisturbed.

This was produced by Curt Becher, and the backing band on most tracks was Scott Blair on drums, Michael Brady on bass, Jim Studer on keyboards and George Doering on guitar.

Looking Back With Love

Songwriters: Jim Studer, Craig Thomas, Dan Parker

Because his surname is Love, do you see?

The thesis of this song is that the 1960s were an age of contradictions, thus “It was the best of times, the worst of times/An age of reason with a rage for rhymes”. Unfortunately, that line is the best in the song, seriously, and it hits a low in the second verse with the line “Good vibrations/Assassinations”.

As an exercise in nostalgia it fails horribly, partly because Dan Parker, the lyricist, has the same writing style as Love himself, cramming in as many lyrics to older, better songs as he can (“Soulful sounds from the motor city, California girls now are sure looking pretty/Two girls for every boy”), succeeding only in reminding you of the better records you could be listening to; but also because it seems to epitomise the saying “If you can remember the 60s, you weren’t there”. Lines like “mod rockers dancing in a Liverpool street” suggest that Parker definitely doesn’t remember the 60s.

Combine this with a synth-pop arrangement, faux-Beach Boys harmonies (featuring a guest vocal from Bruce Johnston) and Love at his most nasal, and what you have is unpleasant.

The album goes downhill from here.

On And On And On

Songwriters: Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus

It makes a sort of sense for Mike to cover this track, since the original, by ABBA, had a backing vocal arrangement clearly influenced by that on Do It Again. That backing vocal is made the intro here, but the problem is the song itself.

While Andersson and Ulvaeus are not the pop geniuses their reputation these days suggests, they were capable of coming up with good songs. This isn’t one

of them. The song sounds like an ELO cast-off, and not in a good way, and is hamstrung further by terrible lyrics like “He said, ‘I’m a minister, a big shot in the States’/I said, ‘I just can’t believe it, but I think it’s great/Brother can you tell me what is right and what is wrong?’/He said, ‘Keep on rocking baby, ’til the night is gone”’

Of course, Andersson and Ulvaeus can be forgiven for these lyrics, because they’re not native English speakers. Mike Love has no excuse for singing them.

The backing track is actually a relatively competent example of disco-influenced synth-pop, making the most of the song’s three-chord simplicity, but the combination of the terrible song, Mike’s nasal delivery, and the addition of a vocoder makes it an embarrassment.

Running Around The World

Songwriters: James Haymer and Blair Aaronson

Possibly the least unpleasant track on the album, this features co-composer Blair Aaronson on synthesiser, and other than the poor 80s production and nasal vocals would be an inoffensive enough track. For the most part it’s just based on a I-vi verse and a ii-V chorus, and the only point of interest is a backing vocal quote from This Whole World.

Over And Over

Songwriter: Robert James Byrd

This is just strange. Over And Over was originally recorded by the R&B singer Bobby Day (who wrote it under his real name), the writer of Little Bitty Pretty One, but was a number one hit in the US for the Dave Clark Five (whose version is roughly patterned on the old Little Richard song Money Honey) and is quite a catchy example of late-50s R&B.

For Mike to have done a straight cover of either version of the song would have made some kind of sense, especially given that the album seems very loosely themed around nostalgia for the late 50s and early 60s. It wouldn't have made a lot of sense, because Day's version, especially, has a very strong vocal performance and Love was at his most nasal at this time, but it could have been a competent, fun cover version.

Instead, it's done as an ersatz-Caribbean track– actually quite similar in production style to Blondie's version of The Tide Is High, which is presumably the influence here (although Becher had been producing similar-sounding records with California Music for years), which fits neither the song nor Love's voice, and to make matters worse they introduce a totally unnecessary truck-driver's key change up a semitone before the last verse.

Rockin' The Man In The Boat

Songwriters: Jim Studer, Jim Arnold, Michael Brady

If you have ever, in your life, wanted to hear Mike Love singing in his most nasal voice, over a Status Quo style chugging boogie (but with a bridge in the

style of Chicago) about watching through a telescope while a female friend masturbates (and close analysis of the lyrics suggests that she has forewarned him of this), then this is the song for you.

If, on the other hand, you are someone whose tastes have not been totally corrupted beyond all human decency, you will stop the track as quickly as possible, and spend the rest of the week showering in the hope that you can someday feel clean again.

The low point (in a track that is already the lowest point in an album made up of low points) comes when Mike once again feels the compulsion to reference an old song lyric – “You know I’d love to lend a helping hand, you’re such a good singer let me join in your band...She don’t need it, got a good vibration”.

This is quite possibly the most monumentally misjudged recording of all time.

Calendar Girl

Songwriters: Neil Sedaka and Howard Greenfield

The worst’s over now. Mike Love has punished us, has shown us what horrors he is capable of committing, and now we can relax slightly.

Not that this is good – Calendar Girl is a terrible song – but this is actually better than the version of the song the Beach Boys had recorded (and left unreleased) during the LA sessions. The track’s got some energy to it, it suits Love’s voice,

and the sax solo is quite nice.

It’s possible Stockholm Syndrome is sinking in, but this sounds like a relief after the last track. But then, anything would.

Be My Baby

Songwriters: Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and Phil Spector

This track dates from 1980, and features Brian Wilson on keyboards and inaudible backing vocals. Were it not for the layers of 80s synth overdubs, this could have fit on 15 Big Ones, but would have been one of the less successful covers on there. It has none of the dynamics, passion, or majesty of the original, just Mike Love singing lines like “you know I will adore you ’til eternity”, which should be a howl of emotion wrenched from the gut, with about as much passion as the shipping forecast.

One Good Reason

Songwriters: Jim Studer and Michael Brady

This is merely tedious, a vaguely doo-wop flavoured (6)/(8) ballad that doesn’t even rise to the level of truly bad. The second half of the album is definitely better than the first (if better is the right word...less awful, certainly), but it still only rises to the level of “bad”, and the cumulative effect is much, much worse than any individual song.

Teach Me Tonight

Songwriters: Sammy Cahn and Gene DePaul

Teach Me Tonight is a standard, recorded by, amongst many others, Nat King Cole, Count Basie, Earl Grant, and some performers who didn't have any noble titles in their name at all. It's one of the songs that people talk about when they talk about the "great American songbook", though it also fits one of the recurring themes of this album in that it has a metaphor overextended to the point of absurdity.

The track here is in the same late-70s soft-pop style as L.A. (Light Album), but with the addition of a Stevie Wonder style harmonica part (played by Tommy Morgan, who played on many of the Beach Boys' 60s recordings).

Love's singing is much better here, but the production style still handicaps the track and... it's only a personal reaction, and others may differ, but for me Mike Love attempting to be coquettishly seductive starts me shuddering and sends me back to that shower again.

Paradise Found

Songwriters: Mike Love and Jim Studer

Mike Love's only songwriting contribution on the album is to this, the (thankfully) last song, a duet with Joannie Sommers. Another track that sounds very like Chicago, this one once again falls victim to Love's compulsion to cram the titles of Beach Boys songs into everything, meaning the main chorus line is "let's go away for a while", once again reminding us of something we could be listening to instead of this.

Overall, when listening to any individual track on this album (except Rockin' The Man In The Boat), it can feel like my introduction was too harsh – one can find tracks throughout the Beach Boys' career that are worse than any individual song here (except Rockin' The Man In The Boat). It's the cumulative effect – the sheer deadening joylessness, the crassness, and, perhaps worst of all, the impression that at least some of those involved actually thought they were doing something of artistic value.

There are moments here that, in isolation, could almost qualify as competent. But they're few and far between, and overall one is left feeling slightly soiled for having listened to this. But I feel even worse for having written this review – it's like kicking a puppy. The makers of this album were clearly trying to do something worthwhile, something that would make people happy, and to do it to the best of their ability. To attack them for that seems cruel, but so would letting anyone listen to this without adequate warning.

In a way, this is one of the most successful works of art that I've ever come across, in that it helps me understand myself better – my first instinct, when writing this piece, is to go all-out with vicious, hyperbolic, mockery. Believe it or not, I toned a lot of that down before publication. But I revelled in the cruelty – this album had hurt me with its awfulness, now I was going to hurt its creators. This album showed me a side of myself I'd rather not have seen, and in that way it might be a much more effective work of art than many better albums.

But that doesn't mean it's actually any good.

Youngblood

And here we come to the last album that will be dealt with in this volume. The story that's played out over the thirteen years covered in this book is of the battle between two factions of the Beach Boys – on the one hand Carl and Dennis Wilson, pushing for greater artistic progress, and on the other Mike Love and Al Jardine, allied more by their dislike of the Wilsons' drug- and alcohol-fuelled lifestyles than anything else. Each faction was trying to gain influence over Brian Wilson, and each had allies, but the two factions had been balanced for most of that time, though by this point things were shifting as Carl Wilson had cleaned up the worst excesses of his lifestyle.

Youngblood, Carl Wilson's second solo album, came out in February 1983, and was the last recording put out by any of the band before that balance shifted, horribly, with the death by drowning of Dennis Wilson in December that year.

From that point on, the Beach Boys would be following, pretty much exclusively, the vision of Mike Love. Some interesting things have resulted, as we will see in volume three, but the tension between the two factions of the band was over, for good.

So Youngblood is the last album to have been created when the Beach Boys were still the band dealt with in this volume, and it's a strange one. It's almost as mediocre as Carl Wilson, but not quite – if nothing else, it's better sequenced, and the addition of a handful of cover versions gives it some much-needed energy.

But also, the album benefits from the production of Jeff “Skunk” Baxter, and the combination of Carl’s live band (who had toured with him during his solo tour in 1981, though he was now back with the Beach Boys) with the session musicians, like Nicky Hopkins and Vinnie Colaiuta, with whom Baxter was used to working.

The result is an album that is far more listenable than its predecessor, but is still lacking in ambition – a bunch of very talented people making music that is, ultimately, pointless.

All songs by Carl Wilson and Myrna Smith-Schilling except where noted.

What More Can I Say?

And the album begins as it means to go on, with a song that is essentially as unimaginative as any of those on Carl Wilson, but performed with far more energy and enthusiasm than any of the tracks on that record. While the track speeds through as fast as possible, distracting the listener with the rush of the tempo and Baxter’s twiddly, ultra-fast guitar playing, the production – which is much, much better than anything on the previous album – doesn’t cover up the dullness of the underlying material.

She’s Mine

This is, frankly, the most unpleasant thing ever recorded by a member of the Beach Boys. The lyrics are misogynist as hell – “Don’t ask her she’s mine/She’ll tell you different but she ain’t free”, while the backing track is horrible 80s AOR

that could be Survivor, Journey or a million other terrible bands.

The low point – not just of the song, but of Carl Wilson's entire career – is the second chorus, where he sings – of someone who is supposed to be his girlfriend, mark you, and of whom he's said earlier "let me supply all the love she needs" – "that bitch can't help it if she can't be true".

"That bitch".

No more need be said really. This is a song from the point-of-view of a controlling, dominating man who thinks his partner is a "bitch". Not sung with any Randy Newman style ironic unreliable narration, but with a cock-rocking swagger.

Abysmal.

Givin' You Up

Songwriters: Carl Wilson, Myrna Smith-Schilling and Jerry Schilling

Jerry Schilling gets a co-writing credit for this, according to Billy Hinsche's liner notes for the 2010 CD reissue, because he suggested to Carl the idea of "a love affair unselfishly ending and nobody is to blame". Myrna Smith-Schilling wrote the lyrics, and was apparently unaware that she was writing about the end of her own marriage with Schilling.

In fact, while Schilling's original idea was to have the affair end "unselfishly", it's hard to imagine a more revoltingly egocentric, self-serving song than this – "I gotta admit you were there when I needed, still there's something I gotta find", "I've outgrown your love", "In order to find me I'm givin' you up". Possibly it's just the context, coming after the last song, but this sounds almost psychopathically narcissistic. That said, Wilson sings the song as well as ever.

This was released in a slightly different edit as the B-side to What You Do To Me, and the single edit is a bonus track on the CD reissue.

One More Night Alone

Songwriter: Billy Hinsche

Easily the best track on the album, this was written by Carl's ex-brother-in-law Billy Hinsche, the Beach Boys' touring keyboardist.

A slow "big ballad", it's based around Hinsche's electric piano part, and like many piano composers he uses a much richer harmonic vocabulary than guitarists, so the first line of the song has the progression C-Fmaj7-Dm7-Bm7/E-E7/G# – a descending pattern where each chord removes the highest note from the one before while adding notes on the bottom – and then the second line (Am-Am7/G-Fmaj7-F6) does more or less the same in the relative minor. This isn't particularly clever or original, but it is more interesting than the bulk of the album.

And given decent material, Carl Wilson really shines, turning in his best vocal on the album, starting with an almost-whispered first verse, singing the second in full voice, and straining at the emotional peak on the middle eight.

The song's far from perfect – the lyrics show signs of rhyming dictionary abuse, the middle eight's not very well thought out, and there's a horrible sax solo – but compared to everything before it, this is revelatory. This is what should have been the minimum standard for a Carl Wilson solo record, and it's pretty shameful it took until the fourth song to reach that standard, but we're there now.

Billy Hinsche later released a solo version of this on his live CD Bay Of Plenty.

Rockin' All Over The World

Songwriter: John Fogerty

A straight cover of the John Fogerty song, this adds nothing to what was never an especially original song. If you like three-chord rock songs about rockin', that rock, then you'll like this. I don't, although Nicky Hopkins' piano solo lifts the track slightly.

What You Do To Me

Songwriters: John and Johanna Hall

This track was the only single from Youngblood, and is a note-for-note cover version of a vaguely Latin-flavoured track from the John Hall Band (led by John Hall, a former member of rock band Orleans, and a Democratic Congressman from 2006 to 2011). The backing track is so similar, in fact, that it sounds closer to a different mix of the same track than to a new recording, although it isn't.

While there's nothing of substance to the song, which is just three chords and lyrics like "What you do to me/Feels so heavenly", the track has an energy to it, though it's not wonderfully suited to Wilson's voice.

The single reached number 72 on the US charts, and number 20 in the Adult Contemporary Billboard charts, and stayed in the Beach Boys' live set for a short while.

Young Blood

Songwriters: Doc Pomus, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller

This is a cover version of an old R&B hit by the Coasters, which had also been recorded by, among others, the Beatles and Leon Russell.

However, while the Coasters' original plays the song for laughs, here Wilson teases out the creepy, stalkerish undertone of the lyrics – something that isn't hard to do with lines like "I tried to follow her all the way home/Then things were bad, I met her dad/He said 'You'd better leave my daughter alone"'. But slowing down the track and emphasising the horns gives it a sinister edge, and then adding in the voice of Barbara Reilly, treated to sound like she's on the telephone, saying "Who is this?" and getting no response, gives the song a whole

different feeling.

Easily the best actual song on the album, this is also the one that has had the most thought given it by far. Given the misogyny of some of the material on Carl Wilson, it's pleasant to see some of that deconstructed here, and it puts Wilson into rather a better light than the previous record did.

Of The Times

This is just nasty. A galumphing AOR track that wouldn't have been out of place as a B-side by Survivor or Foreigner, this is an utterly mediocre song with a straight quiet verse/loud bombastic chorus, along with a screeching solo by Jeff "Skunk" Baxter instead of a middle eight, but what kills it are the lyrics.

This is an attempt at non-specific social comment, and as with all non-specific social comment by big 80s rock stars, its message is ultimately inhuman. The verses talk to someone who is concerned about "the state that the world is in" and that "the dollar won't buy all the things you need", but then the choruses say "But who else can you blame for the state of your mentality/If you're just a part of the times?"

The last couple of verses offer newage (not a typo, rhymes with sewage) platitudes about how positive thinking will allow you to change the future, but fundamentally this is a vile bit of victim-blaming. If someone's struggling with poverty, then being told by a multi-millionaire that it's their own fault and that it'd get better if they just think positive thoughts really doesn't help.

Too Early To Tell

Songwriters: Carl Wilson, Myrna Smith-Schilling and John Daly

More utterly generic rawk, this time a track written as the show opener for Wilson's solo shows. A duet with Smith-Schilling, there is literally nothing notable about this track, which has lyrics like "It's time to rock and roll and let it all come out, that's what it's all about". Lots of twiddly fast guitar attempts to cover up a lack of an interesting song.

Even though I've only written three sentences about this track, I've probably still spent more time writing about it than its composers did writing it.

If I Could Talk To Love

Easily the best of the originals on the album, this is a gentle ballad which unfortunately turns into a power ballad half-way through, but it has more harmonic imagination than any of the other originals, with some nice playing around with major and minor versions of the same chords giving the song a harmonic ambiguity lacking in anything on either this or Carl Wilson.

The song shows off his voice to better effect than anything else on the album, has a relatively restrained arrangement (at least until the drums kick in at 2:18, bringing 80s 'sonic power' along with them), and features a very nice, understated, flugelhorn solo by Lee Thomberg that's far more effective than any of the squealy, twiddly, Skunk Baxter solos on previous tracks.

One might also wonder if, given that this album was written and recorded around

the time that Carl Wilson resigned himself to the Beach Boys grinding out the hits and being a nostalgia band, there might be a not-especially-well-hidden subtext in lines like “I put myself into your hands/From this moment on, I make no demands/And if one could talk to love, I’d say/Have it your way, love, have it your way”...

Time

Not the same song as Dennis’ solo song of the same name, this is a three-chord chugging boogie that Billy Hinsche compares, in the liner notes to the CD reissue, to Status Quo. It’s an accurate comparison, but he sees it as a good thing whereas I don’t. After the slow intro, It’s all fast quaver chords on the piano in a rough approximation of Jerry Lee Lewis, but without any of the excitement or danger that one would find in Lewis’ music.

And as this phase of their career drew to a close, that’s what the Beach Boys had become, both solo and together – a band trying to recapture former greatness, either their own or other people’s, and failing miserably. A mediocre, forgettable end to a mediocre, forgettable album.

Acknowledgements

This book would not have come into being without the discussions I've had for over half my life with members of the Beach Boys fan community, both online and in person. Most of my knowledge of this band comes not from books - which with a few notable exceptions are horribly inaccurate - but from these discussions. There's no way I can list all of the people who have contributed in this way, but special thanks should go to Val Johnson-Howe, Ian Alexander-Barnes, Kingsley Abbot, Margaret Dowdle-Head, Iain Harris, Andrew Doe, Tobias Bernsand, blick, topgazza, the late Bob Hanes, Van Dyke Parks, Blake Jones, Trevor DeMont, Paul McNulty, Sean Macreavy, Alex McCambley, Paul Baker, Shawn Taylor, Adam Marsland, Blake Jones, Sean Courtney, Rob McCabe, Annie Wallace, Rob Dean, Jon Hunt, John Lane, and more generally all members of the Pet Sounds Mailing List from 1997 through to 2006 and all the regulars at Beach Boys Britain and the Smiley Smile board.

Three resources have been more helpful than any others in checking both the facts and my interpretations of the music. Andrew Doe's Bellagio 10452 site [17] is the definitive word as to the 'plain facts' of the band's career from 1962 through to 1999. Philip Lambert's Inside The Music Of Brian Wilson is the best musicological analysis of, specifically, Brian Wilson's music from 1962 through 1967 I've ever read. As you can imagine that book overlaps with this one in a number of areas, and where those overlaps exist Lambert goes into far more detail than I have space for. And finally Francis Greene's transcriptions of the chords for every Beach Boys song [18] have been an absolute godsend. Craig Slowinski's Beach Boys Archives website at http://www.beachboysarchives.com/ was invaluable for the chapter on Pacific Ocean Blue, about which he has written a 69-page document that goes into frightening detail, and more generally his research about who played what on Beach Boys sessions has been incredibly useful.

Thanks should also go to all those who have encouraged me in my writing in the past, including, but not limited to, Steve Hickey, Debi Linton, Lawrence Burton, Jennie Rigg, Simon Bucher-Jones, Andrew Ducker, Andrew Rilstone, Gavin Burrows, Alex Wilcock, Richard Flowers, Mike Taylor, Wesley Osam, Stuart Douglas, Philip Purser-Hallard and Gavin Robinson.

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Where this book is worthwhile and correct, the credit is due them. Where it is dull and incorrect, the blame is mine.

Footnotes

[1] This seems entirely plausible, as that line sounds very like the lyrics to Wilson's contemporaneous song Good Time, later released on The Beach Boys Love You.

[2] For more on Smile see volume 3, out later this year, where I will discuss the Smile Sessions box set and Brian Wilson's 2004 completed solo version of the album.

[3] Roughly, this translates to "victory to the great teacher", where "the great teacher" can mean both a higher, more spiritual level of one's own mind, and can also (for those who, like Love, follow the principles of Transcendental Meditation) mean the specific person who trained the Maharishi.

[4] Later years of course being relative. This was twelve years into a fifty-year career...

[5] On the other hand, the lyric is slightly more comprehensible in the USA than elsewhere, as the "Mr Fulton" referred to, Robert Fulton, is considered a major historical figure in the US for his development of the first successful steamboat. He doesn't, however, have the same "as every schoolchild knows..." status elsewhere.

[6] A version of the song with Dennis Wilson on vocals was released in 2008, on the Pacific Ocean Blue CD reissue, and will be discussed in the chapter on that album.

[7] An absolutely wonderful album, which anyone who likes good songwriting should check out.

[8] Wood has talked about being invited to the session because Brian Wilson admired Wood's Beach Boys-esque doo-wop pastiche Forever, a hit for him in the previous year. He's spoken in interviews about having sung on at least one track with the band, singing at the same mic as Brian and Carl. Whether his

vocals are somewhere in the mix here is, however, hard to ascertain, and it may be that they were wiped or that he sang on a different, as yet unreleased, track. According to Andrew G. Doe, who is the foremost expert on the Beach Boys, “Roy played drums on “It’s OK” and “Honeycomb” 10/74 but only basic tracks were recorded. No vocals.”

[9] A TV gameshow producer, who created The Newlywed Game and The Dating Game (for UK readers, these are the shows that were remade as Mr. And Mrs. and Blind Date), and who later became the presenter of The Gong Show. His autobiography, Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind, also claims that he was a CIA assassin who killed thirty-three people, though the CIA have denied this.

[10] Which can currently be read at http://bit.ly/15vUtk8 (a shortened version of a URL at smileysmile.net

[11] Johnny Otis is one of the less well-remembered figures from 50s rock and roll, but he was hugely influential, playing on Hound Dog by Big Mama Thornton, having hits himself with his own band, and presenting the radio show which, in one of the more believable bits of Brian Wilson’s ‘autobiography’ Wouldn’t It Be Nice, was the programme on which Brian and Carl Wilson first heard R&B music.

[12] Though it was inspired by his temporary split from then-wife Karen Lamm

[13] Several of the Christmas songs were released on the later compilation Ultimate Christmas, and will be reviewed in volume three.

[14] The track was originally released through his website, but later appeared on the 2005 set What I Really Want For Christmas.

[15] When tracks from LA have been released on compilations or singles, they have sometimes credited individual band members as producers.

[16] According to http://www.damninteresting.com/this-place-is-not-a-place-of-honor/

[17] http://www.esquarterly.com/bellagio/

[18] http://www.surfermoon.com/tabs.shtml#francis

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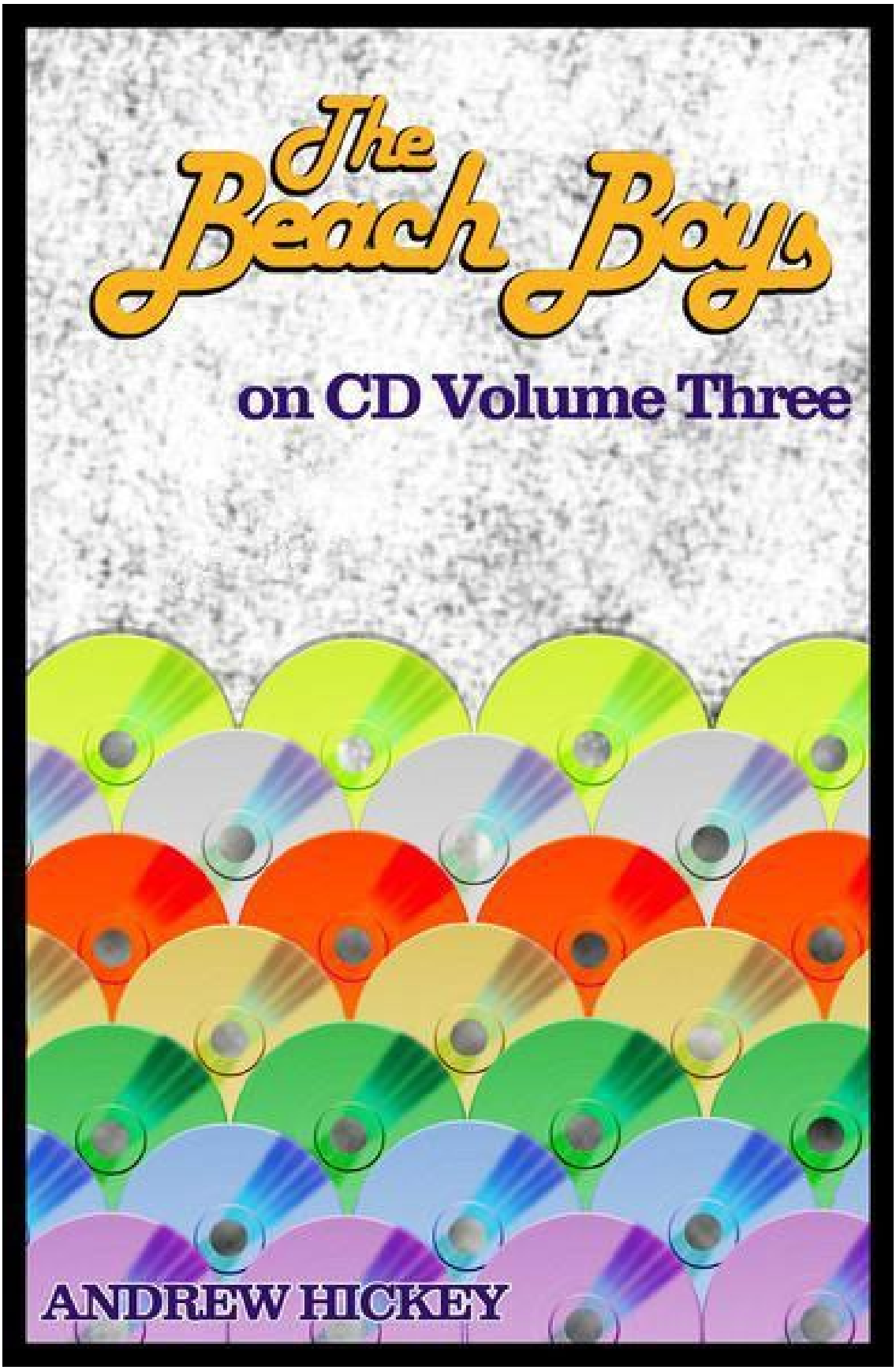
The Beach Boys
on CD Volume Three
ANDREW HICKEY

Between 1983 and 2017 the Beach Boys released dozens of albums, together and apart, including some of the best music ever recorded - and some not so good. In this book, Andrew Hickey looks at this music track by track, analysing every song that Brian, Carl, Dennis, Mike, Al, Bruce and David recorded and released during that time period. From 1980s hits like Kokomo to Brian Wilson's solo rerecording of Smile, in this book you'll learn how they were recorded, why they work the way they do, and which albums to buy if you want to hear a great band at their best.

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Ideas and Entities

Watch for more at Andrew Hickey’s site.

About the Author

Andrew Hickey has, at various times, been an ordained minister who performed a wedding on the banks of the MIssissippi dressed as Elvis, pretended to be David Aaronovitch on TV for money, had his poetry praised by UA Fanthorpe, been called a genius in a novel that topped the bestseller charts in Germany, and ghostwritten YouTube videos that have been watched over ten million times. After accidentally writing two books, he decided he should probably try to do it deliberately, and has been stressed and short of money ever since.

Read more at Andrew Hickey's site.